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PC GAMER

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

PC GAMER®

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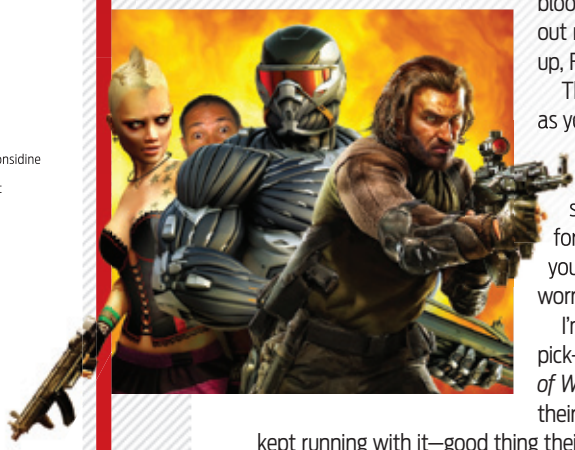
The fun gun

I can honestly say that the only living thing I've ever shot was someone I'm related to, and it was with a BB gun, and *I totally swear it was an accident*. Otherwise, I'm just like most PC gamers: a normal, law-abiding citizen with a profound respect for woodland creatures and a love for PC games that involve shooting weapons. All that violence and blood and gruesome death animations tend to freak out non-gamers, but as Bill Murray once said, "Lighten up, Francis." It's just a game.



Then again, we *do* take our shooters seriously. And, as you'll see in this month's issue, developers will go to astounding lengths to keep our trigger fingers happy. Our feature story highlights the biggest shooters in development this year and probes them for their unique angles and their lustworthiness—so if you don't plan to, say, craft any stars this year, don't worry. There'll be plenty for you to do on your PC.

I'm also pleased to introduce a six-page guide to pick-up groups in *WoW* from our guildmates at *World of Warcraft Official Magazine*. We picked it up hot off their printers downstairs here at Future HQ and just kept running with it—good thing their keycards don't work on this floor.

Oh, and keep those comments on our recent redesign—good and bad—coming to letters@pcgamer.com to let us know how you feel. We think you'll love the changes just around the corner, too. And if you don't...just shoot us.

LOGAN DECKER
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logan@pcgamer.com

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WHODUNIT

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
Evan mines for precious shooter metals in his review of *Lead & Gold: Gangs of the Wild West* on page 72.

Dan Stapleton
Reviews Editor
Dan challenged designer Chris Taylor to a multiplayer round of his own classic 1997 RTS, *Total Annihilation*, on page 86.

Dan Fitzpatrick
Lead Designer
Dan cracked himself up with the boxout of creepy ghost girl Alma trying new approaches to terror in *F.E.A.R. 3* on page 61.

Josh Augustine
Contributing Editor
Josh learns the ways of *Love* in his review of the beautiful, intriguing MMO made by a single man on page 76.

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Your emails, Facebooks, Twitters, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

■ Thanks for recommending *Eve Online* in your Games of The Year Awards. I just started playing last week and have fallen in love with it. It's addicting and quite a challenge.
Nick Sehres

■ You know what the *Mass Effect 2* DLC should be? Probes that strip-mine planets for their resources, then vaporize them. I'd pay 1600 Microsoft points for that.
Jeff More

■ I just noticed your lofty praise for Ctrl-Alt-Del. However, there is a faster way to get at the processes you so desperately want to kill: Ctrl-Shift-Esc. Much better than having to go through an additional dialog on most default setups of Windows.
Erwin Dunbar

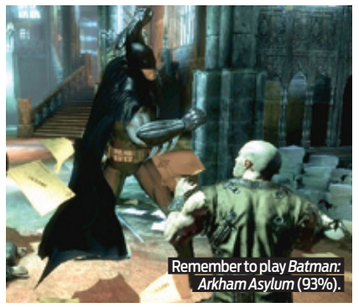
Yup, but if a game locks up your screen, the Task Manager may not be visible (unless you've got two monitors set up). It's handy to know both commands, just in case. ***PCG***

■ Could you name three game sequels that were better than the original?
Rafi Jarjous

Yes: TIE Fighter *(sequel to* X-Wing*),* Medieval 2: Total War *(sequel to* Medieval: Total War*) and, of course,* Half-Life 2*!* ***PCG***

Greatest hits

I love the new look of *PC Gamer*; specifically the "*PC Gamer*'s 10 Latest and Greatest." I know it's a very small part of some big changes to the magazine, but when I start jonesing for my next PC gaming fix, I couldn't ask for anything better than a go-to list of must-play games. The list even references when the games were reviewed so I can go back into my *PC Gamer* library and read what made these games worth a 90% or better (in case I missed it the first time around). Thanks for all the hard work. ***Nick Stackhouse***



Remember to play *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (93%).

Abandon ship

Your review of *Star Trek Online* was right on the money. I was expecting more, well, *Star Trek*. Instead, I find that my mission is to explore strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilizations...and vaporize them. Death and destruction follow wherever my starship goes. Even bars are not safe from my homicidal crew. I feel as though I've warped into the Mirror Universe, as my actions are not at all consistent with Federation behavior. Somehow I just can't see Jean-Luc Picard exterminating the patrons of a space-station pub. The missions are repetitive, and nearly all require you to kill scores of Klingons, Gorn or other races. The few missions where you don't have to destroy alien life forms revolve around simply finding the shiny object and scanning it. Surely they can come up with better ideas than that. I may try it again down the line, but as of now, I've beamed out for the last time at the conclusion of my initial 30-day subscription. ***Kirk Carroll***

Smear campaign

I was displeased to see your writers once again bashing Cryptic for releasing a paid-for expansion to *Champions Online*. Cryptic announced back in February that the *Revelation* expansion would be released free of charge, but you bashed Cryptic in your April issue MMO roundup for forcing players to pay for this expansion, and you bashed Cryptic *again* in your May issue review of *Star Trek Online*, saying that players should beware of Cryptic forcing them to pay for further content as well. Your misinformation is needlessly turning people off to a company that has actually been going to great lengths for months now to please their user base.
Jake Clayman

We've got no ax to grind with Cryptic. Our April issue MMO roundup went to press before Cryptic announced the reversal of plans to charge for the Revelation *expansion, and our May issue praised that decision on page 15. However, Cryptic has made it clear that they plan to aggressively charge for content, as much as they can get away with without outraging subscribers ($3 Klingon, anyone?), and that's something we think gamers should absolutely be aware of when making purchasing decisions about Cryptic's recent games, which have been short on end-game content out of the box.* ***PCG***

THE HOT MAIL

Wrong side of the law

I started playing *Aion* in beta, but things are now getting out of control with NCsoft. They have a new series of Rules of Conduct that are not part of the EULA that they have posted on their website. Part 11 states, "You may not advertise the intent to or commit the act of buying or selling items for cash or trading items from one server to another," and they are banning the accounts of anyone that purchases kinah (*Aion* currency) without warning. My legion has lost two members, who were permanently banned for purchasing kinah. Is this lawful or just something they can get away with?
Michael Miller

Not only is this lawful, but in D&D *terms, this is a solid "lawful good" action by NCsoft that nets them favor with the appropriately-aligned deity of their choosing. The Rules of Conduct for* Aion*, as with most MMOs, are mentioned, linked and, for all legal purposes, included in the EULA—see article 1(a) in* Aion*'s particular case.* Aion *has outlawed the buying and selling of virtual goods at least since we started playing in the beta, so it's tough for your friends to claim ignorance on this one.* PC Gamer *strongly believes that the gold farming/selling industry degrades the experience for regular MMO players, and periodic cleanouts like this one help keep the ill effects of those nefarious gold farmers in check.* **PCG**

Please insert coin to play as a Klingon or Ferengi Starfleet captain or to buy more than three character slots.

PRTSCN

He came from...behind!

Just Cause 2's Rico Rodriguez doesn't let little things like "missing the boarding process" or protests of, "Sir, you can't bring 12 guns onto the plane" stop him from catching his flight. Rico goes where Rico wants.
Tom Francis

SHOW US YOURS Take a great screenshot lately? Send it to us at letters@pcgamer.com with PRTSCN in the subject line and a description of what's going on in the body, and we might feature it in next month's issue.

Don't count your Zerglings

Great 200th issue, guys! One disappointment, though. I'd been waiting for months for you guys to brag about the one prediction *PC Gamer* made on the back page of issue 100 that was 100-percent accurate: *StarCraft II* in 2010! I was pleased to see the article on page 12 rating the accuracy of your issue 100 predictions, but how did you miss this one? Were you too distracted by the picture of Stevie "Killcreek" Case?
Mark Jenkinson

We'll claim credit for that prediction just as soon as it comes true, but we don't wanna jinx it. If Blizzard senses we're taking a 2010 release date for granted, they could decide to hold onto StarCraft II *for another year or two just to teach us a lesson in humility.*

False positive

I was excited to see not one, but two games in your "50 Game to Play at Work" story in the May issue that I'd actually like to play. *Crush the Castle* and *Spaced Penguin* hearken back to similarly themed games I enjoyed way back in the DOS era (ask your parents). Both websites require a plug-in—a reasonable requirement for a browser game—but the installation brought up a screen requiring me to OK the installation of a "trial version" of a "spyware detector" from Norton. I'm trying hard to keep trash software like this off my brand-new Alienware monster. Let me know if the developers of those games ever release versions without the crapware. ***Chris Weiser***

Article Title
ILLOGICAL
Game Name
The promising universe of STAR TREK ONLINE holds more disappointment than wonder By Josh Augustine
Need to know
What is it?
Influenced by
Play it on

You're right to be cautious, Chris, but rest assured that we screened every one of these games to make sure none requires any sort of crapware installation. What you encountered was an optional install for a Norton Security Scan trial bundled with the Adobe Shockwave Player installer—uncheck the box that says "Include Norton Security Scan" and push next, and your system will remain pristine as you knock down castles and sling-shot penguins. **PCG**

Name game

Why add unnecessary titles to reviews in the new design? In the May issue I spent several minutes reading about this FPS game called "Bold War" and a space MMO called "Illogical" before I realized that those weren't the actual names of the games.
Bryan Yamnitz

It may take a couple of minutes to get used to (just long enough to notice the game name written in big bold red letters), but we like the idea of our reviews being articles about the games with their own titles. We think it classes up the joint a little. **PCG**

We A your Qs

I want to thank Evan, Josh and Erik for the Ventrillo Q&A sessions. It's unbelievable how patient and thorough they were in answering every single one! Keep treating your fans this way and they'll throw themselves between you and *Mass Effect 2* mining every day of the week. Squirrel stamps all around!
Nicholas Mirsky

It's our pleasure, Nicholas! Keep an eye on facebook.com/PCGamermagazine or Twitter @PCGamer for announcements on when you can join in to the next live Q&A. **PCG**

BACK CHATTER

■ Love the design of the new issue. The mag's never looked better!
@Ward7Dave

■ Received the 200th Issue of @pcgamer magazine yesterday, and LOVE the changes! Easy to read, welcome back columnists! Not enough gravy, however.
@David_Shea

■ I just got the 200th issue and I really like the new update you did to the magazine. I think it's a change for the better.
Philip Shields

■ Yay! Andy Mahood is back with his Sim column! Welcome back, brother. We missed you.
FourthHorseman

■ Kudos on mentioning the horrid DRM on *Assassin's Creed 2*. I'm not buying it, not pirating it and warning friends. Wish the score reflected it.
@MBourgon

WHERE WE PLAY

Play on the official *PC Gamer* community servers

Battlefield: Bad Company 2
8.17.251.133 (search "PC Gamer" in the server browser filter)

Counter-Strike: Source
207.210.252.63

ArmA 2
75.102.38.106

Garry's Mod
8.17.251.201

Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, *PCG*'s staff-approved hosting service. Visit **artofwarcentral.com**

Deus Ex Machinations

The world got a first, fleeting glimpse of *Deus Ex 3* at this year's Game Developer's Conference. Should fans of the best game of all time be worried about the second stab at a decent sequel?

Nothing transforms us into a rabid, flesh-swiping mother bear faster than a developer that abandons the best aspects of a classic PC game to create a more "accessible" sequel. This was the regrettable fate of *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. It wasn't an awful game in itself, but stripped of the RPG substance, freeform play and tremendous storylines of the original *Deus Ex*, and rendered in soggy, last-gen console textures, it quickly faded from memory. Meanwhile, the legend of the original continued to grow (we named it the best game of all time in the in February 2010 issue of *PC Gamer*). So when Eidos Montreal began to drop hints about the third installment getting its first flash of sunlight at the Game Developer's Conference last March in San Francisco (a prequel referred to as both *Deus Ex 3* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*), we were naturally curious.

Like all teasers, the trailer that debuted at GDC generated more questions than answers, and was intended to highlight the game's new art style that combines "eclectic variables like cyberpunk and the Renaissance." Eidos Montreal waxed philosophical on themes—segregation, fear, transhuman-ismbut what little it's said of the of the gameplay has us concerned.

Earlier this year, lead game designer Jean-François Dugas told *PC Gamer*, "We want to remove the RPG aspect of the fighting and make it more straightforward, like you see in games such as *Rainbow Six*. So if you're good at shooting, the game will not tell you you're not good at shooting because your stats are low." This design decision will no doubt broaden the game's appeal, but our love of *Deus Ex* emanates from the lateral-thinking approaches we come up with when guns don't work. If spray-and-pray can get you through from one end to the other, Eidos Montreal risks making alternative approaches feel pointless. It's also discouraging that none of the 130-plus artists, programmers, designers or writers working at Eidos Montreal were on the original *Deus Ex* team.

We're expecting Eidos Montreal and publisher Square-Enix to finally lift the skirt on the nitty-gritty gameplay-workings of *Deus Ex 3* next month at E3. We'll be there in the front row, hoping beyond hope that the prequel beats the sequel. ■

EvanLahti

READ ME
PUBLISHER Square-Enix
DEVELOPER Eidos Montreal
RELEASE Winter
LINK deusex3.com

An average afternoon in the life of a man with iron lungs and a carbon-fiber liver.

Deus Ex's new cities are dual-tiered: rich people live up top.

Expect to infiltrate and shoot your way through high-security facilities like this augmentation plant.

The *Deus Ex* Mood Ring

Deus Ex: Human Revolution—what we know and how we're feeling about it

COMFORTING

Concept art shows off a variety of grenades and firearms, so we know weapon/augmentation upgrading will be a core aspect of player progression. If this extends to gadgets, we'll have a flexible toolset of items to create subclasses for our characters.

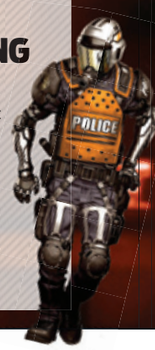
NEUTRAL

Biopolitics and transhuman rights will form a heavy-handed plot in *Human Revolution*—humans that use bionic "augmentations" face discrimination that evokes slavery-era America. One trailer shows a "We do not welcome augmented people here" shop sign. We wouldn't shun *Deus Ex 3* for making a statement about real-world issues; we just hope preachiness doesn't replace the fun, conspiracy-laden fiction we love from the original.

WORRYING

Mirroring most modern shooters, *Deus Ex 3* will use a regenerating health system. But part of the appealing tension of *Deus Ex* was being forced to develop new solutions on the fly when you ran out of health-restoring items. Regenerative health is usually in place, keep players fighting; leaning against a wall until you're ready to shoot bullets again doesn't suit *Deus Ex*'s spirit.

UNSETTLING



The original *Deus Ex*'s half-blind, easily duped AI enemies were one of its most charming and fun-producing parts. We wouldn't ask for the same brainless AI in *Human Revolution*, but so far, Eidos has only said that each enemy squad will have an identifiable leader. If that leader is killed, the squad falls into disarray. Thinking purely pessimistically, this feels like a compromise and a simplification of the nuanced behavior of the original AI.

Monkey Island 2 back from the dead

Another LucasArts classic gets loved up

Following last year's enhanced re-release of *The Secret of Monkey Island*, LucasArts has greenlighted the same treatment for *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge*.

The silly adventure game core remains untouched: it retains the original's classic puzzles, settings and characters, meaning that the spitting competition will return and you'll still have to manipulate the speed at which a monkey plays a piano by putting a banana on a metronome. But this version is sparkling with pixel-pumped pirates and redrawn artwork, sharpening everything for today's scary resolutions.

There have been a number of gentle modifications to bring the game into step with modern-day adventures: you can control Guybrush directly, should you choose, rather than using the beloved verb system of the original SCUMM engine. There now is also a hints system to help baffled players locate items of interest. But if any tampering with the original masterwork sounds sacrilegious, then there's always the option to switch back instantly to the original, unedited and lovably lo-res version.

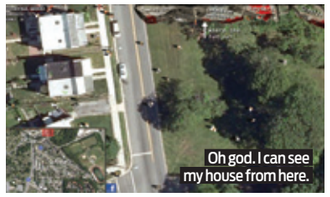
The established cast return to lend their voices to the adventure, backed by a full orchestral score. Most intriguingly of all, the game comes with an optional commentary track, with the original creators offering insight into the gestation of selected scenes. ■

Martin Davies

FIGHT ZOMBIES IN GOOGLE

BRAAAINS THE MUNCHING UNDEAD COME TO WASHINGTON

We like games that don't use traditional engines. *Class 3 Outbreak* charts the zombie apocalypse in Google Maps as you defend either Washington or Leicester, England from the undead menace. As the infection gets out of control, you have to chaperone scientists through the city, trying to protect their precious minds from brain-munching deadopaths. *class3outbreak.com* **MD**



RIBBON HERO

TRAAAIN FUN WITH MS WORD 2007. NO, REALLY.

When Principal Skinner told Bart Simpson, "Licking envelopes can be fun! All you have to do is make a game of it," he could have been talking about *Ribbon Hero*, Microsoft's Word 2007 add-on. *Ribbon* watches how you use Office and creates challenges to make you more efficient. It is, of course, a very boring application, but a fascinating look at how games are being used to make things more interesting for the workers. *Typing of the Dead* it's not, but procrastinators should find it fun. Grab it from *office-labs.com/ribbon-hero*. **CP**

BLAST RADIUS

Blasting apart the weapon stats of *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*

RANGE (M)	WEAPON	PICTURE	DAMAGE	DAMAGE VS VEHICLE
0.6	M136 AT4		100	420
1	AT MINE/C4		290	865
1	FRAG		110	33
1	RPG7		100	360
1.8	40MM GRENADE		100	75
1.8	CARL GUSTAV		100	280

NOTE: "RANGE" INDICATES THE DISTANCE AT WHICH WEAPONS DEAL THEIR MAXIMUM DAMAGE

THE SPY

There's a strong sense of brotherhood among spies. Certainly, as The Spy garotted a Swedish operative in the dark of an Uppsala backstreet, he could recognize the glimmer of fraternal solidarity in the bulging, bloodshot eyes. "Do what you have to do," he seemed to be saying. "I give my life with pride in the knowledge that it serves you in our shared profession. Also, Starbreeze's Jason Bourne game has been canned." With this startling news imparted, the Swede quietly left this world for a better place or, at least, the riverbed. The Spy shed a solitary tear as he weighted the man's pockets with rocks. He was really looking forward to that game, too.

Two zip-lines, a broken window and a chloroform-drenched cloth later, and The Spy had obtained further details from the developer's HQ. All is not lost for Bourne—writer Robert Ludlum's estate is still very much in partnership with EA. And EA is still in partnership with Starbreeze—the code-named Project Redline is still underway there, resurrecting a long-dead EA franchise that fuzzy satellite telemetry suggests might be *Syndicate*.

> ***Modern Warfare 7* will have a zombie mode again.**

And that's not the only thing clawing its way back from the grave, as The Spy discovered while gently persuading a Treyarch employee to talk. "Aieeeee," screamed the employee, as his arm popped from its shoulder socket. But The Spy knew what he really meant: "Do what you have to do, my brother. I lose bladder control with pride in the knowledge that it serves you in your noble cause. Also, *Modern Warfare 7* will have a zombie mode again." Before the wage slave succumbed to blessed unconsciousness, The Spy managed to extract a few more choice facts about Treyarch's upcoming shooter, and teeth, too. Subtitled *Black Ops*, the game will swoop through time, depicting covert shenanigans in Vietnam, Cuba and South America, and even tempting public admonition by recreating the Iranian embassy siege of 1980. The worker couldn't remember whether it was due out in October or November—but that's concussion for you.

WHEELIE SAYING SOMETHING

The Spy gave the employee a fraternal nod to thank him for the information, then a fraternal chop to the neck, and stuffed him into a shipping crate, fraternally. The Spy suffered a moment of disorienting déjà vu as he remembered how he'd infiltrated the US patent office the previous week, hiding beneath a cheese platter on a rolling cart as the careless patent-pushers gabbed about all the trademarks for secret games they were approving. Those loose tongues confirmed that NCsoft is moving forward with plans for a *City of Heroes* sequel, cryptically entitled *City of Heroes 2*.

DRIVING AMBITION

Jabbing another informant in the eye socket with a blue pen, The Spy could read his spasming body like a book made out of a spasming body. "Do what you have to do," The Spy inferred. "I will bleed out with the knowledge that I have contributed to the consummate professionalism with which you execute your job. Also, SimBin has another *GTR* game in the works. Don't ask me how I know, being the fictitious subliminal pronouncement of an employee from an unrelated company, but it's true." Further details quickly emerged about SimBin's plans, as The Spy soon stalked their darkened offices, tranquillizing cleaning ladies. One worker remained conscious long enough to confirm that it will take gamers back to the roots of SimBin-style racing games, while innovating with a host of online features. Thanks, sister, thought The Spy as he slid her into an elevator shaft. That's what family's for. Spy out. ■

Release Meter

Spider-Calendar, Spider-Calendar: it does whatever a Spider-Calendar can. Mainly, that's trapping buzz and rumor into a messy web of intrigue. How does Spider-Calendar do it? Webbing the front doors of major developers to assure they get a faceful of date-capturing strands before they stumble into work each morning.

Q2 2010	
Alpha Protocol	Sega
ArmA 2: Operation Arrowhead	IDEA Games
EVE Online: Tyrannis	CCP
Greed Corp	Valcon Games
Lead and Gold: Gangs of the Wild West	Paradox
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4	Warner Bros.
Rise of Prussia	Paradox
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse Episode 2, Episode 3	Telltale Games
Split/Second	Disney
The Sims 3: Ambitions	EA
Tropico 3: Absolute Power	Kalypso
Victoria II	Paradox

Q3/Q4 2010	
APB	EA
Battlestar Galactica Online	Bigpoint
Crysis 2	EA
Dead Rising 2	Capcom
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	Square-Enix
Disciples III: Renaissance	Kalypso
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
F.E.A.R. 3	Warner Bros.
Lionheart: King's Crusade	Paradox
Mafia II	2K
Medal of Honor	EA
Need For Speed World Online	EA
Portal 2	Valve
Rage	Betheda Softworks
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse Episode 4, Episode 5	Telltale Games
Sid Meier's Civilization V	2K
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Subversion	Introversion
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	Ubisoft
Two Worlds II	SouthPeak
World of Tanks	Wargaming.net
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

2011: THE TOMORROW ZONE	
American McGee's Alice II	EA
Diablo III	Blizzard
Guild Wars 2	NCSoft
Mass Effect 3	EA
MechWarrior	(TBD)
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA

Massive Attack

Overdue Blitzkrieg

End of Nations puts the MMO-RTS to the test

There are fire-breathing raid bosses, but they don't live in dungeons.

Though two of the great pillars of PC gaming, RPGs and shooters, have become well-established online, the genre of tank rushes and turtling has had a rough time establishing a foothold in the MMO scene. But Petroglyph, developer of real-time strategy games *Star Wars: Empire at War* and *Universe at War: Earth Assault*, believes it's found a way to get the genre back on track for that subscription-based holy land with its new near-future military game, *End of Nations*.

The gameplay of *EoN*, like *Supreme Commander 2* and *Command & Conquer 4*, is tactical RTS but without traditional base-building elements. Instead, players build structures on a persistent, nondestructible plot of land, accessible through the game's menu, to earn abilities to use in-game (e.g., building an airport gives the ability to call down a napalm strike). In effect, your base is something like an RPG talent tree. Players start with a small armory and collect more powerful tanks, light armor and artillery as they play. More powerful vehicles don't necessarily mean a more powerful army, though—your active army is limited by a point system that will allow you to take anywhere from 20 weak tanks to one superpowerful tank into battle. *EoN*'s maps function like zones in an MMORPG: gigantic chunks of land with quest hubs and respawning enemies that host up to 50 (co-op) players at a time.

DPSers will bring a lot of buggies to the battle, tanks will bring...well, tanks.

The most unique and promising element is definitely the command room, a very dynamic-looking view styled after CNN's Situation Room that functions as a portal to every element of the game. Get to the combat via an interactive map of the world highlighting hotspots, see what your friends and guildmates have been up to recently with the news tickers along the bottom, or click any of the streaming videos to watch a replay of a recent game or jump into observer mode on any of your friends currently playing. ■

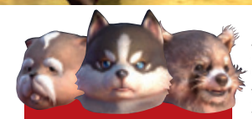
Luck Be Damned

It's all about skill in *TERA*, an upcoming fantasy-action MMO

That armor may not leave much to the imagination, but at least it covered his nipples.

What you see is what you get in *TERA*. When an enemy swings a giant axe towards your abdomen, don't pray to the Random Number Gods for a dodge or parry dice roll. You want to dodge it? Dodge it yourself. Each of the eight classes has an evasion ability that allows the player to avoid incoming damage. Slayers (melee DPS) roll out of the way like action heroes, Lancers (tank) stop attacking to hoist their shields high and Mystics (caster) teleport a short distance away. It's your skill, more than your gear or level, that determines how powerful you are in combat and what enemies you can take on. By watching for the tells of my enemy's attacks and dodging out of the way just in time, I was able to whittle down the health bar of a group boss at a much higher level than me.

In fact, *TERA*, scheduled to launch later this year, replaces the lock-on mechanic entirely with an aiming reticule, meaning that spells need to be aimed and swinging swords do damage to anyone they hit—a refreshing change. ■



Furry Woodland Creature Approved

The Popori "race" is actually a coalition of animals, with 12 different body types currently available, including panda bear, badger, dog, cat and hamster.

THUS ALWAYS TO TYRANTS

When Brutus murdered Julius Caesar, it's said that he uttered the phrase, *sic semper tyrannis*, meaning "thus always to tyrants." There's no more appropriate motto for *EVE Online*—its players have been stabbing at the tyranny of developers over their game worlds since *EVE*'s inception, gaining more and more power to influence the game themselves. This expansion continues the players' march towards self-reliance by granting them the ability to construct facilities on any of *EVE*'s 65,000 planets that they own, designing their tertiary bases from a big-picture perspective that's focused on placing extractors, refineries and other industry-related buildings near resource deposits. Managing production flow along routes between outposts, command centers and spaceports will play a major role in players' attempts to design efficient resource production lines that can span multiple planets. ■

Connecting the dots ensures a consistent export of planetary resources to fuel your corporation.

Interdimensional Train Station

Freaky plants and insane faeries find a home (in your home) in *Rift: Planes of Telara*

Telara is a planet under constant invasion. Rifts—portals from thousands of other dimensions—frequently erupt across the world without warning. While only six dimensions will be invading at launch in 2011, the lore permits anything from Roman armies to top hat-wearing barons of industry to show up at any time. The nature-themed rift I encountered was at the same time gorgeous and terrifying. The sky turned a heavy green as gnarled roots erupted all around me and a giant, pulsating vine reached down from overhead. I cut through the plant-infested wolves and spiders until I caught up with the creepy spider-queen and sent the interlopers packing back to their own dimension. *Rift*'s engrossing art style, a hybrid of painterly aesthetics and just-off Wonderland proportions, continued to impress as I made my way through a garden maze filled with disturbing faeries and brain-dead Welsh warriors, and dove into a small pool of water to conquer the game's first dungeon. ■

Don't give me that look! YOU'RE the one invading MY world, remember?

Combo Clobbering

Action MMO *Divine Souls* is bringing arcade-style combat to the masses

With combat more akin to *Street Fighter* or *Devil May Cry* than *World of Warcraft*, *Divine Souls*' classes pack some exotic weaponry for you to chain those combo attacks together with. Here are three of our favorites.

Mage

Is not: Sissy book-reading wizard

Is: Hand cannoneer of the future

Weapon of choice: Spells, but the fire walls and ice blocks don't erupt from her fingertips so much as the oversized cannon she's carrying on a staff.

Our favorite move: *Hold Cannon* (E→E)

Grabs her enemy by the scruff of their neck, jabs the staff to their throat and sends them packing with a fireblast to the face.

Fighter

Is not: Old-timey boxer

Is: Cyborg power-puncher

Weapon of choice: A Power Fist that allows him to smash ground, faces and anything else nearby, with the full might of a metal arm charged with deity power.

Our favorite move: *Screw Hammer* (W→F→RMB)

Sprints forward and jumps, spiraling through the air fist-first, drilling all enemies in front of him.

Slasher

Is not: Sword-wielding knight

Is: Whip-swording Indiana Jones

Weapon of choice: An elongating sword built like a spinal cord of sharp metal vertebrae, giving it whip-like flexibility on demand.

Our favorite move: *Snake* (LMB→LMB→LMB→E)

Reaches out to impale an enemy on his extended sword, then whips it in a circle to whack everyone else around him with the body.

ENEMY OF MY ENEMY...

STAR TREK KLINGONS, FEDERATION FIGHT A COMMON FOE

There's no greater threat in the *Star Trek* universe than the Borg. So when the cube-flying jerks show up in a free content update to *STO* and start releasing large quantity of chronometric particles (which the Borg did the last time they tried to alter Earth's history), the two player factions decide to temporarily work together in a new repeatable daily fleet action mission to stop 'em.

WARMING UP

CATACLYSM SOME CHANGES ALREADY CREEPING INTO AZEROTH

A plethora of *Cataclysm* information is being released as Blizzard ramps up for a larger beta test phase of *WoW*'s anticipated expansion. The class changes announced so far are focused on allowing raid leaders to "bring the player, not the class" by sharing important group buffs (like Heroism/Bloodlust) across multiple classes. It's not all waiting though—before *Cataclysm*, players can fight to reclaim the lost capital cities of the trolls and gnomes, Echo Isles and Gnomeregan respectively.

CRAVING SALTY BRAINS

DDO UNDEAD SWASHBUCKLERS PILLAGE THE SHORES OF EBERRON

As gamers, we love to fight pirates and we love fight to zombies, so it's a fair assumption on Turbine's part that we would love to fight zombie pirates, the key enemies in the five-adventure Sentinels adventure pack that's included in the latest content update for *Dungeons and Dragons Online*. The adventure pack is free to subscribers and can be purchased or rented in the game store by everyone else.

WOW, IT'S *WOW*!

Check it out! The mother ship recently launched *World of Warcraft Official Magazine*, and *PC Gamer* readers are getting the first crack at some of the loot from the second issue. This 6-page feature breaks down the new dungeon finder tool and tells you how you can make sure your dungeon run is successful. To get the expert advice and behind-the-scenes scoops in every issue, go to **worldofwarcraftthemagazine.com** and subscribe. This luscious magazine is not available on newsstands!

ADVICE

PUG is not a four-letter word

THE UPDATED DUNGEON FINDER TOOL GRANTS ACCESS TO CROSS-REALM MATCHMAKING, SEAMLESS PORTING, AND A BEVY OF LOOT. JUST ADD A GREAT GUIDE, A PINCH OF COMMON SENSE, AND SOME GOOD MANNERS, AND HAPPY FIVE-PLAYER DUNGEON CRAWLING IS YOURS FOR THE TAKING!

By Casey Lynch

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PICK-UP GROUPS

Pick-up groups, love them or hate them, are essential for most players who want to accomplish anything that requires more than one person in *World of Warcraft*. Sure, it's nice to be able to group with friends, but sometimes even the most reliable guildies have other things to do. Luckily, setting up a five-player PuG has become streamlined with the updated Dungeon Finder tool that debuted with the *Fall of the Lich King* content update (3.3).

The Dungeon Finder groups solo players or smaller parties of players together and places them either in random dungeons or in dungeons of their choice. It enables players to teleport to and from the dungeon and features cross-realm grouping. All this results in faster instancing and lower wait times compared to the old way.

For newer players (or folks leveling their alts), it's an immediate gateway to instances starting at level 15, without long treks across enemy-laden zones. For level-80 players, it represents a swift way to get their mitts on top-notch loot and a bevy of badges (Emblems of Triumph and Emblems of Frost are the current rewards). Whether you're in it to level, to collect badges for spiffy vendor loot, or just for the laughs, here's a primer for how to get the most out of the time you'll spend with the Dungeon Finder.

THERE'S A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYONE, AND SOMETIMES YOU MIGHT BE PLAYING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE JUST NOT USED TO GROUPING.

—Ereth, Quel'Thalas

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O HAI GUYS, THIS WAY!

As a rule, every party needs a good leader. Queuing up as a dungeon guide is as easy as checking the box next to the green flag in the upper-right-hand corner of the Dungeon Finder interface. But remember — doing so means you'll take responsibility for the finer points of communication and delegation during your run, for better and for worse, so make sure you're up for the task before you do so.

Ereth, a level-80 human priest on the Latin American realm Quel'Thalas, agrees. "You have to check out your party's gear, watch for the appropriate buffs to go up, and politely communicate things like asking that antsy tank to wait for the first pull because the damage dealers are still drinking." Thoughtful communication and simple courtesies like these go a long way. Ereth continues, "There's a first time for everyone, and sometimes you might be playing with people who are just not used to grouping with others. The guide should remember this and help players progress accordingly, to avoid time- and material-consuming wipes."

THERE'S NO LOL IN TEAM

Any role in a five-player party, guide or not, comes with an expectation of functional and social responsibility. For starters, come to a dungeon repaired and prepared with reagents, potions, food, and drink. And be ready to run — the last thing your teammates want after waiting for a dungeon to pop is for you to immediately go AFK and leave everyone hanging around, twiddling their virtual thumbs (or paws).

Emtrutnod, a level-80 draenei shaman playing on the Oceanic realm Nagrand puts it very succinctly: "Do your job. Warlocks should cast their Soulstone on the healer. Mages should drop snack tables — or at least ask if their teammates want food. Everyone capable of buffing should cast his or her buffs without being asked."

Maintaining effective group functionality also means biting your tongue sometimes. Don't grief the tank for losing aggro, or the caster who grabbed it. Be civil, discuss what might have happened, and look for a positive solution. Everyone may not be at the same skill level — help them become better players with positive feedback. Don't vilify them for mistakes — help them get better rather than making them feel worse.

Ultimately, you can meet all sorts of characters throughout your dungeon-crawling travels. Treat everyone as you would like to be treated, and most of the time, people will respond in kind. If someone is being particularly unruly, try to take the high road and concentrate on what you need to do to complete the run. If all niceties fail, you can always call a vote to kick them, but use that as a last resort.

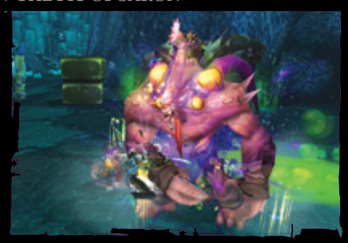
DIGGING INTO THE DUNGEONS

HALLS OF REFLECTION

Tackle the opening waves of heavy-hitting trash mobs by stacking out of line of sight in the alcoves. Concentrate on the priests first — their AoE knockback and ability to heal can be problematic, so burn them down fast. And watch for the ranged damage-dealers. Sometimes it's difficult for the tank to get aggro on them because they are out of his or her sight — which is why it's important for everyone to tuck into the alcove, forcing those mobs to move much closer to the group, where they can be picked up much more easily.

The first two bosses (Falric and Marwyn) are your basic tank and spank. During the getaway sprint from Arthas, focus DPS on the Risen Witch Doctors first, then the Lumbering Abominations, and keep on moving up the path, since this is a timed escape. Do it in less than six minutes for the We're Not Retreating; We're Advancing in a Different Direction achievement.

THE PIT OF SARON



Watch out for the giant saronite chunks the first boss, Forgemaster Garfrost, throws — they do big damage if they hit you, so keep on your toes. During the second boss encounter, make sure you move constantly during Krick and Ick's Explosive Barrage ability. For the Ymirjar groups that follow, mark them individually and quickly burn them down one at a time.

Be sure to sprint to the halfway point of the ice tunnel gauntlet before stopping to take on the monsters that are chasing you (look for the big circular metal plate on the floor). Avoid the icicles by steering clear of the spell marks on the floor; if you avoid them all, you can get the Don't Look Up achievement.

The final boss fight, Scourgelord Tyrannus, is fairly straightforward. Just make sure you stop dealing damage or casting spells if you have the eight-second Overlord's Brand cast on you. Otherwise, let it rip with everything you have.

THE FORGE OF SOULS

This is a quick run, but be warned: the mobs pack some major hit points, and can dish out some serious punishment. When you encounter the first boss, Bronjahm, stack up together on him when he casts his Soulstorm AoE damage spell. DPS characters should take on the Corrupted Soul Fragment adds, or allow four to spawn and then down him while all four are still alive (which is trickier than it sounds) for the Soul Power achievement.

For the Devourer of Souls fight, stop damage during the Mirrored Soul debuff, avoid the wraiths during Unleash Souls, and take cover during Wailing Souls.

HALLS OF LIGHTNING

Stay out of General Bjarngrim's way when he goes into his Berserk Stance and take down dwarf pats quickly, as they'll heal him. Run away when Ionar's sparks start crawling down the hall, and similarly, flee Loken's Lightning Nova, keeping a 10-yard range between players to avoid damage from his Arc Lightning.

TRIAL OF THE CHAMPION

The first fight starts on horseback, which takes some getting used to. Try to keep your shield at the maximum (green) and don't be afraid to grab a new horse if you take heavy damage. After you knock your opponents off their horses, the rest of the fight is a simple tank and spank, though mark each boss for a quick, clean burn. In the final Black Knight fight, back up to stay clear of the ghoul explosions after each phase; otherwise, let the miserable old party pooper have it with everything you've got!

AHN'KAHET: THE OLD KINGDOM

For the Elder Nadox encounter, always shift DPS and melee to Guardians when they spawn. Against Jedoga Shadowseeker, the third boss, kill the minion selected for sacrifice ASAP. The final boss, Herald Volazj, becomes invulnerable twice during his Insanity cast, creating hostile doppelgangers of each player. Yeah, go ahead and kill your evil twin.

AZJOL-NERUB

This dungeon can be run very quickly indeed, and features three boss fights in fairly close succession. Watch for the zerg rush with Krik'thir the Gatewatcher. When you reach the final fight against Anub'arak, make sure you're in the "ring" before you trigger the fight or you'll be locked out.

HALLS OF STONE

The standout encounter in this dungeon is the Brann Bronzebeard escort mission through the Tribunal of Ages. Tank the mobs at the entrance to the room and stay away from the Searing Gaze beam… or die. Against Sjonnir the Ironshaper, if you don't down him before the oozes spawn, pick up the Malformed Ooze adds immediately. That is, unless you want the Abuse the Ooze achievement for killing five Iron Oozes. If that's the case, allow two Malformed Oozes to combine and create one Iron Ooze, let five of these spawn, kill them, and then take down Sjonnir for the achievement.

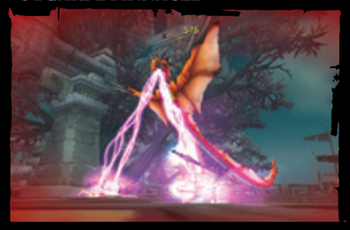
A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN EASE YOUR PATH THROUGH AZEROTH'S DUNGEONS

THE OCULUS

One of the best-known and most feared dungeons of the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, the Oculus is easier now than it has been in the past thanks to some recent adjustments — and more appealing, too, thanks for some new rewards. Make sure you grab the appropriately colored drake for your role (ruby = tank, amber = DPS, green = healing). Move upward methodically, clearing each tier of monsters, and don't forget to clear the outer rings, too.

During the final fight against Ley-Guardian Eregos, try to stay very close together to maximize healing. During his Planar Shift phase, Eregos becomes invulnerable and fires Planar Anomaly sparks that chase you; strafe away from the glowing balls, and as soon as they disappear, group up again and continue to burn him down.

UTGARDE PINNACLE



When facing Skadi the Ruthless, designate a player to be in charge of harpoon duty, which means looting the harpoons and shooting down Skadi. The final face-off with King Ymiron is basic tanking and spanking — just don't get alarmed when his Scream of the Dead stuns everyone in the party for eight seconds.

DRAK'THARON KEEP

Make sure to send ranged DPS to AoE the top of the stairs to burn down the mobs during Novos the Summoner's immunity phase. King Dred is straightforward — just burn him down and prepare for his fears. During the final boss fight, everyone in the party is turned into skeletons when the Prophet Tharon'ja casts his Decay Flesh spell. Pop your Bone Armor first for a huge armor buff, then spam Slaying Strike. You'll be back to your normal self before you know it, and you can finish off the bony boss.

GUNDRAK

All the bosses in these dungeons are fairly easy to overcome. Prepare to be speared by large charging animals during the final fight with Gal'darah, and let everyone in the party get impaled when he transforms into a giant rhino for the Share the Love achievement.

CAVERNS OF TIME: THE CULLING OF STRATHOLME

All of the bosses are tank and spank including the timed Infinite Corruptor in Heroic mode, which drops a guaranteed Bronze Drake. Nowadays, you have a VERY high chance of nabbing the reins to this very fast flying mount as most players running this already own the mount.

THE NEXUS

Watch the pulls in the Hall of Stasis; triggering too many ice-blocked mobs at once can spell disaster, especially on Heroic with Commander Stoutbeard (when you're Horde) or Commander Kolurg (when you're Alliance) running around. When facing Anomalus, make sure DPS switches to the Chaos Rifts immediately. Keristrasza is your basic dragon spank; avoid the mouth and tail, keep moving, and burn her down fast.

UTGARDE KEEP

This cousin to the more difficult Utgarde Pinnacle is a quick and basic dungeon crawl. The final boss, Ingvar the Plunderer, is resurrected after you down him the first time, but it doesn't take long to burn him down to his second death.

VIOLET HOLD

This one is good old-fashioned basic fun. Portals open up. Stuff comes out. Kill it.

If you get Ichoron, the Defense Control Crystals spread along the walls can help diffuse the elemental adds, but other than that, this dungeon is a nice warm-up to the *Lich King*'s more challenging dungeons.

HEALING PUGS

"When you first go into a dungeon as a healer, check everyone's gear and start formulating a game plan," says Peace, a level-80 priest from Zul'jin-US. "If the tank looks like he or she has just hit 80, but your DPS are dripping with purples, you might have to anticipate the tank losing aggro to the hail of DPS rained down by your party's hurt-mongers. Likewise, if all your new random friends are sporting quest greens and basic gear, it'll take them longer to kill things, and their lower-armored gear and lower health will result in a little less margin for error if things go awry than with epic-geared people. Knowing what you're dealing with is half the battle, and allows you to anticipate and control the situation more, rather than simply reacting to what's going on and being blindsided. It'll also help you give quality direction during the run, if needed, to ensure the group is successful."

If things do start going wrong, you'll need to make some tough decisions about who lives and who dies. Joemannix, a level-80 night elf druid on Kilrogg-US says, "When things get dicey, I let low DPS go first and ranged casters second. The tank must survive at all costs. I have taken down bosses in Icecrown Citadel five-player Heroics with just a tank left. If they are good, you can heal through the end of a battle."

TANKING PUGS

If healers babysit the tank, tanks babysit the highest DPS in PuGs, at least according to Gilicil, a human paladin on the Oceanic realm Nagrand. Like Peace, she recommends a quick team evaluation before rushing off into the first group of monsters. "Identify your top DPS immediately. It used to be the tank's responsibility to protect the healer, but I don't really find that to be true in PuGs for the most part. A look at the DPS characters helps me establish who might potentially cause me trouble during the run. And don't ever assume a party can handle multiple pats simultaneously. I have seen many tanks do that and the DPS and healers aren't up to it. It's a recipe for an insta-wipe. Take it easy for the first few fights, look at what's going on, and adjust your strategy based on how your group is performing. And one last thing: Always keep an eye on the healer. Wait for them to drink up before you hurtle off in search of the next group, and don't forget that they can't heal around corners!"

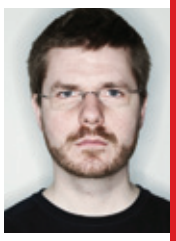
For even more details about tanking random dungeons, take a look at the tanking column on page 136 of this issue, which covers some of the best practices for tanks using the Dungeon Finder tool.

DEALING DAMAGE IN PUGS

DPS may bring the boom, but that boom needs managing, says Jeangeanie, a level-80 mage from Kilrogg-US. "I like to let the tank season the meat, so to speak. I let them build up some nice aggro on the monsters before laying into them. Make sure you are concentrating on the tank's main target, and working within the limitations of the tank's abilities. Don't go all-out from the beginning. Watch to see how the tank is playing — it's easier to dial up the damage if the tank is good than dial it down if the tank is less experienced and can't handle your damage."

They key thing for DPS characters to remember is that the point of running a Heroic is to get to the end of the dungeon unscathed by working as a team — it's not a showcase for impressing everyone with your fantastic damage-dealing abilities. Sure, you might be able to pull 8,000 DPS, but that's not going to be very useful if you keep on pulling aggro and putting everyone in jeopardy. The very best DPSers are the ones who make a dungeon run feel easy — and that is a fun challenge in and of itself.

DEV MAN TALKING



Torfi Frans is Senior Producer of *EVE Online* and has been with the game since 1999. When he was 12, he gutted his microcomputer and wired speakers onto a cardboard box that he put over his head to feel more immersed in the space fighting/trade game *Elite*.

Two years ago, late night readings of obscure Wikipedia articles drove me to a week-long vacation in North Korea, where I experienced a real-life version of George Orwell's *1984* between unrelenting propaganda and luxurious meals of very rare beef and dog meat. It was a relaxing vacation, though, as I had to leave my ever-buzzing Blackberry and laptop in China and wasn't allowed to bring any books or materials that "described a Western way of life."

Each morning we were awakened by our omnipresent tour guides, fed well, herded into a bus and presented with a carefully orchestrated agenda of museums, memorials and even a children's school, where blissful revolutionary youth sang hymns praising the "great leader" Kim Jong Il. Everything was completely rehearsed and well-executed. As tourists, there was no straying from the bus or mingling with the natives. All menus were fixed. We took predetermined routes—there certainly was no asking to turn down an interesting street or slowing to watch thousands of identically-dressed people train relentlessly for government parades. Like it or not, we were in for a ride.

Invisible walls

My trip to North Korea wasn't unlike the linear experiences you find in most computer games. "Begin in a confined area. Travel to the next zone. Stop here for some action. Keep moving to the next site." NPC interactions are limited. Stray too much? You're arrested for spying or spotted by vigilant machineguns. Game over.

North Korea was spectacular for a week. There was a lot of exciting content to see, but few would enjoy being stuck on a strict tour like that for seven years straight. There's not enough to experience without falling into repetition.

That's the challenge with creating compelling MMOs: how to keep people playing after they've seen it all, worn all the gear and mounted all the mounts? Even in 2010, when we were supposed to have flying cars and a permanent colony on Mars, engaging stories still require careful craftsmanship and NPC AI often rivals that of a small insect. That's where the concept of the "sandbox" comes in. Sandbox games rely heavily on providing tools for people, simply through their actions, to generate the narrative themselves. Because you put enormous power into the hands of the players, sandboxes are tricky to design and developmentally daunting, easily becoming dull if you don't have enough players to spark interesting interactions.

Off the rails

One example of a sandbox system is *EVE Online*'s economy, a fluid market of player supply and demand designed after the NASDAQ stock exchange. If players like a particular brand of missiles, those will sell higher than others, prompting industrialists to manufacture more and miners to seek asteroids for the ore needed to make them. Missiles, components, ore and minerals are all traded on the market. Some players do arbitrage and speculation, trading to make money to spend elsewhere. Success depends partly on guessing how other people in the market are guessing how the prices will evolve—a hugely complicated problem that only humans can solve, as our brains are highly adept at recognizing patterns. That's actually one of the biggest challenges for game developers: how smart the players are. I think it is better to harness that intelligence as a creative driver than be a slave to it—to make tools that accentuate human interaction and freedom of choice rather than attempt to restrict them.

> **We rarely play games to feel safe or to do what we're told.**

As strange as it seems, "scripted" societies like North Korea can be the safest places on earth for tourists that follow the rules—Pyongyang has a lot less random violence than Mogadishu. But we rarely play games to feel safe or to do what we're told. We play to have meaningful experiences, make friends and enemies and, of course, to blow s**t up and watch it burn. ■

Are heavily-scripted MMOs the gaming equivalent of North Korea?

IN SIMULATION

Since ditching Vista for Windows 7, **Andy Mahood**'s current playlist includes *Flight Sim X, DCS: Black Shark, Rise of Flight, Silent Hunter 5* and *iRacing.com*.

After a recent hard drive wipe (note: be *very* cautious with NVIDIA's nTune CPU/GPU optimization app, it can be an evil, system-killing sunnuvabitch), I spent a week reinstalling my favorite games and simulations. One of the first programs to regain its indentured spot on my virgin drive was Microsoft's *Flight Simulator*, still the reigning heavyweight of PC flight sims.

After the obligatory patching process, I had an immediate hankering to take flight. The internet is filled with freeware and payware *FSX* aircraft add-ons—hell, Microsoft created an entire modding *industry* around its flagship gaming product before those soulless plutocrats clipped the *Flight Sim* ACES Studio wing in 2009.

Planes-R-Us

Cruising the web for sim community sites, I found my way to one of the sim scene's A-list developers: A2A Simulations, a payware flight sim site founded by Scott Gentile and staffed by several talented international developers. With a resume that includes the *FirePower* add-on for *Combat FlightSim 3* and an impressive line of *FSX* WWII aircraft (*Wings of Power*), A2A represents the apex of the PC flight sim industry.

A2A's latest *FSX* offering is one of the most storied airplanes in aviation history—the Piper J-3 Cub. This spindly 1940s light aircraft is an iconic, instantly recognizable stick-and-rudder machine that trained more WWII pilots than any other plane. It's a throwback to a time when pilots actually *flew* the airplane rather than letting the airplane fly them. Perfect—just what I needed to reconnect with my PC flight environment.

I downloaded the aircraft in two parts. The first component was the Cub itself, A2A's $24.99 *FSX* add-on that delivers four variants of the classic Piper airframe (standard, floatplane, ski plane and tundra tire-equipped) in nine different liveries. The attention to detail is world-class, with every single rivet and fastener positioned exactly where it's supposed to be. The plane's sparse but expertly-rendered gauge layout also harkens back to a simpler time when anything beyond course, speed and altitude amounted to information overload. For all of its apparent simplicity, however, the A2A Piper Cub is a technological marvel of function over form.

The second part of the download was A2A's Accu-Sim client for the Cub. This $19.99 enhancement advances the PC flight experience from real to visceral. From authentic airframe vibrations at engine start-up to the astonishing subtleties of the aircraft's ground and prop physics, you'll swear you're in a real plane. The basic A2A Piper Cub functions just fine without all this Accu-Sim realism, but once you've nervously side-slipped a three-point crosswind landing for the first time, there's no going back. This is what flying is supposed to feel like.

> "This is what flying is supposed to feel like."

She's a Screamer

As a bonus, the Accu-Sim enhancement even includes a reactive front-seat passenger (the pilot occupies the back pew in this cramped two-seater). "Heidi" is an attractive young thing who you can pre-program as Calm, Silent, Fun or Nervous, although I can't imagine why anyone would select the first two. Just set the lady to Nervous and enjoy the ride as she grabs for the windshield braces in hard turns, chews you out for a rough landing, and screams her pretty head off during radical acrobatic maneuvers.

Although "Make Heidi Scream" sounds like a winning game title, my real satisfaction came from the unmatched fidelity of the flight dynamics and the effort-less inside-and-out visual perfection of the aircraft modeling. A2A's Accu-Sim'ed Piper Cub isn't freeware, but for my reborn PC and me, it was the perfect plane at the perfect time. ■

Few planes define "stick and rudder" more faithfully and distinctly than the Piper Cub.

ALTERNATE LIVES

Desslock can't understand why *Valley of Gwangi* wasn't a commercial hit, even though it featured a midget being devoured. He's getting by during this dino-drought by playing *Din's Curse*, *Risen*, *Avernum 6* and *Just Cause 2*.

If you're old enough, it may have been the outlandish 20-sided dice or someone's character sheet saturated with cryptic numbers and Dorito stains. If you're younger, it could have been the pointy-headed protagonist of a Japanese console-RPG. It's more likely that it was a memorable PC RPG moment, such as Minsc introducing his miniature space hamster or wandering through the postapocalyptic wasteland snatching up bottle caps. At some point, all gamers encounter the catalyst that prompts them to play a roleplaying game. Since I'm basically as old as Imhotep, for me, that impetus was dinosaurs.

That unlikely trigger was unveiled courtesy of the first-edition Monster Manual of the RPG genre's progenitor, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. My normally unenlightened older sister had begun spelunking through Gary Gygax modules almost immediately after the game was conceived. I was naturally trying to gain experience points as a level five pest, so I'd routinely disrupt the staid gaming sessions hosted by my sister. But on one occasion she thwarted my efforts by throwing the Monster Manual at my noggin, inadvertently mesmerizing me with the tome's contents.

Land of the lost

At the time, I felt that *D&D* was a swords & sorcery game that seemed largely "made up," since there was no gaming board, no visible enemies to fight (the lead figurines I wasn't supposed to chew didn't count) and the dice weren't in a pop-a-matic bubble. But my perusal of the Monster Manual changed those impressions forever. Through *D&D* I could roleplay a character of my own choosing, doing whatever I wanted, however I wanted, and the consequences of those actions would be determined by the elastic gaming rules. But what beguiled me most was the fact that I not only could fight Tolkien's orcs and mythical dragons, I could encounter DINOSAURS. Right on page 28 there was a *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

MiniDesslock had always been a fan of dinosaurs and of the classic drawings of the prehistoric beasts by Charles B. Knight. *AD&D* would at last give me the opportunity to live out the adventures I'd been infatuated with since seeing wily cowboys adeptly hurling lassos over an *Allosaurus*'s toothy maw in Ray Harryhausen's *Valley of Gwangi*. So that's how I became hooked on RPGs. Belatedly, I learned that *AD&D* modules and computer game adaptations were shockingly devoid of the terrible lizards. I had been duped.

Jurassic question mark

Dinosaurs are the only monsters that weren't fictitious, and yet they've rarely been featured in RPGs. The only dinosaur-inhabited RPGs I can recall are the now obscure *Ultima VI*-spinoff, *Savage Empire*; and the *Gothic* games, which sneak in a few dinosaurs even though they mess up the nomenclature by calling them "snappers" or, bizarrely, just "monster." *D&D*'s owners briefly restored dinosaurs to franchise prominence by giving them a major role in the Eberron setting, but the fourth edition of *D&D* discarded references to the name "dinosaur" entirely and renamed the creatures "behemoths." Clearly, there's a conspiracy to deny me my Gwangi adventures.

> **"At some point, all gamers encounter the catalyst that prompts them to play a roleplaying game."**

Gwangi in all his glory, courtesy of Joseph Laudati. Now he just needs to be parachuted into the valleys of *Oblivion* or *Fallout*.

I may still have to wait for a dinosaur-infested RPG, but I finally found my Gwangi. Sculptor Joseph Laudati (joelaudati.com) is also a fan of classic renditions of dinosaurs, as well as the films of Ray Harryhausen. I now have an expertly recreated Gwangi, along with a suitable *Triceratops* foe, ready for battle and far more fearsome-looking than those *AD&D* lead figurine "toys" my sister had. Good things come to those who wait after all. Hopefully it won't be another 30 years until my desire for a PC RPG prominently featuring dinosaurs is finally satiated. ■

SOAPBOX

Evan Lahti is Senior Editor of *PC Gamer*. Some of his best friends are fools. He's currently playing *ArmA 2*, *Mount & Blade*, *Alpha Protocol* and the *GoldenEye: Source* mod for *Half-Life 2*.

We gamer types are excellent at being viciously critical of things we don't actually care about. To name a handful: developers that take their sweet time making a perfect game, sequels that come too soon, not being able to play *BioShock 2* with a gamepad, the existence of downloadable content. But the king of these complaints may be, "Game X's AI isn't smart enough."

In nearly two decades of shooters, we've embraced "smart AI" as a misnomer. Game marketing, in part, has inflated our expectations of what the things we shoot should do. Claiming to have "adaptive," "learning" or "complex" enemies is an easy bullet point to slap on a game cover; these terms promise us a challenge awaits if we buy this game. I think brainy enemies are a myth.

"The enemy is smart...very smart," a back-of-the-box quote for 2002's *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix* boasts. "AI reacts to a variety of strategy, stealth and other combat tactics." "INTELLIGENT ENEMIES WHO WANT YOU DEAD," 2007's *Call of Juarez* screams. "Next-gen AI emulates true squad behavior and allows enemies to use the environment to react and adapt to your combat tactics," goes a bullet point on *F.E.A.R.*'s box.

Game marketers can get away with empty jargon like this is because AI is invisible. We don't see the code and algorithms tumbling in the background that drive an enemy—how "reactive" or "realistic" a Russian soldier, cave goblin or sniper seems is drawn from our perception, and that perception relies on the way enemies animate, their pathfinding, particle effects, voice-overs and other stuff we can hear and see.

So when we say "smart," what we're really talking about is the sum of visual and audial feedback that enemies give us—output in return for our input. We value the "dance" that enemies do, in other words—in practice, it's more valuable for enemies to be entertaining than smart.

Think hard about your favorite shooters. *Left 4 Dead*'s special infected become predictable quickly, but it's their distinctive audio cues, like the Smoker's ragged cough, that create tension and entertain us. *Fallout 3*'s combat AI is awful, but popping heads in slow motion makes those gunfights worth our time. The jiggling joy of a ragdolling terrorist corpse is half the reason I still play *Counter-Strike: Source*. The Nazi footsoldiers of *Wolfenstein* won me over with their enthusiastic leaping, diving and ability to bleed like man-sized ketchup packets in jackboots.

Among the complex, personal experiences we have with games, we need to make room within our criticism to embrace the unexpected and hilarious moments that "bad AI" enemies produce. In battlefield simulator *ArmA 2*, enemy soldiers oscillate between being world-class, all-seeing snipers and blind, dumb-as-pudding rookies. But that AI personality creates a valuable character in and of itself—one that my teammates and I mock one moment and yelp in terror at the next. *Rainbow Six*'s Terrorist Hunt mode is in the same boat: filled with schizophrenic bad guys that run through bizarre behaviors, like walking backwards through doors while firing a shotgun through their own body or piling up by the dozen in front of a blocked doorway. Their insanity shatters immersion, but also produces a stimulating, hilarious and tactically-unpredictable threat.

> **"In practice, it's more valuable for enemies to be entertaining than smart."**

Are our memories of entertaining enemies, like those in *F.E.A.R.*, based more on AI or simply animation quality?

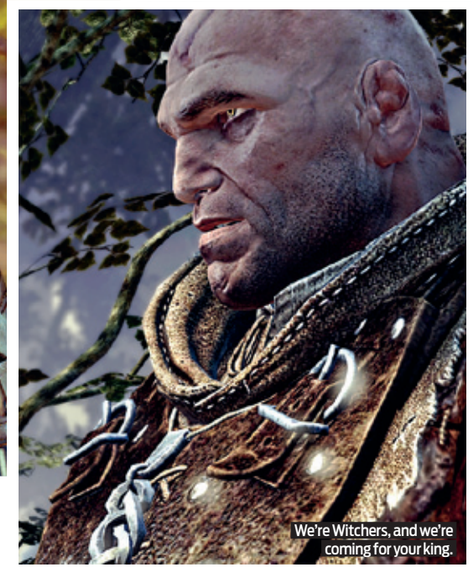
Rethinking how much stock we place in smart AI—questioning whether it is something that's inherently valuable to us as gamers—will move us closer to appreciating the personal experiences produced by less-than-perfect games. ■

THE WITCHER 2: ASSASSINS OF KINGS

FIRST LOOK A sexier, dirtier, nastier RPG

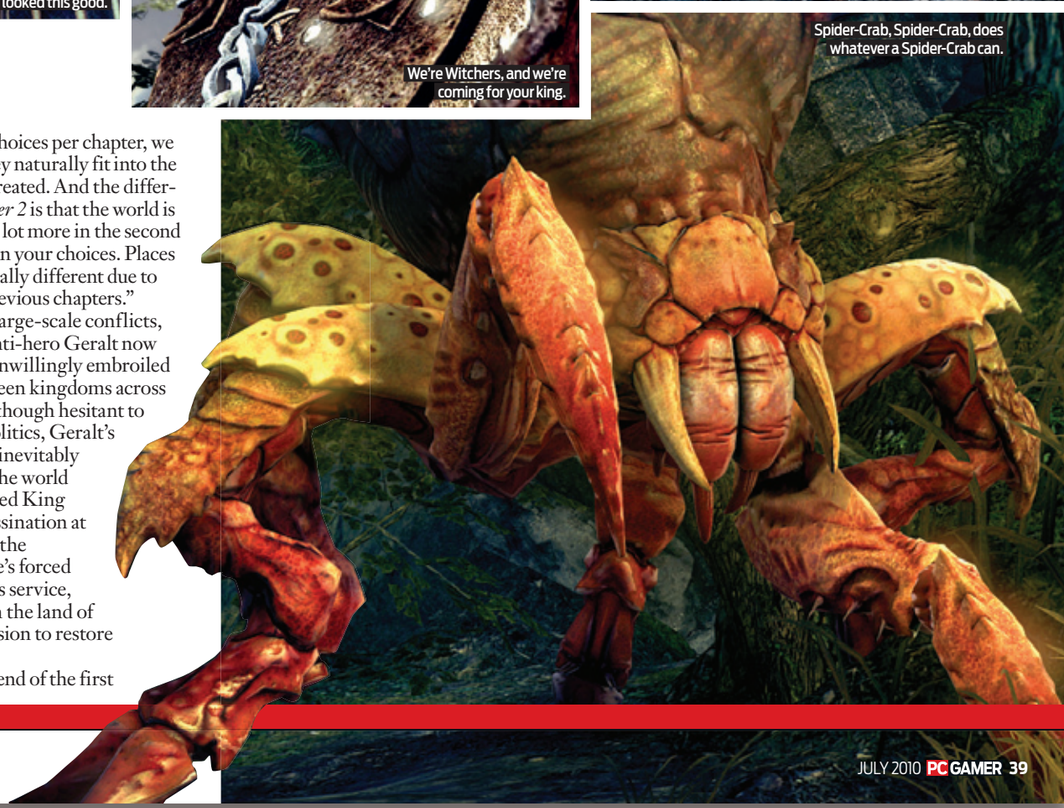
We wish *Dragon Age* looked this good.

Will it be mushrooms, or fried toad rings?



We're Witchers, and we're coming for your king.

Dawdle for even a moment and your journey is in peril.



Spider-Crab, Spider-Crab, does whatever a Spider-Crab can.

READ ME

PUBLISHER
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DEVELOPER
CD Projekt

LINK
thewitcher.com

INCREDIBLE *WITCHER* FAN ART
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We know our limitations," says *Witcher 2*'s Senior Producer Tomek Gop. It's a relief to hear it. For all the credit given to its superbly grubby, off-kilter fantasy, *The Witcher* was a prime example of ambition outstripping the ability to implement it.

Even though Gop says that *The Witcher 2* has been in production since the first much-vaunted RPG hit the shelves, you can't help but worry that it'll remain a work in progress well after its own release. CD Projekt spent a year polishing *The Witcher* after launch, repackaging it as an Enhanced Edition, which weeded out the many bugs, replaced the Polish-to-English translation, revamped combat and revised menu systems for clarity—among a slew of other substantial game-changing tweaks.

This is a commitment to the customer that few other studios would match, but it's probably not the way CD Projekt would have preferred their debut game to turn out. So, for the sequel, they've put their sensible hat on and kept ambition in check, right? Well, sort of. They started by building a new engine from scratch, allowing for a much larger world that's more profound in its reactivity to the player. Isn't this asking for trouble?

"We really pride ourselves on the moral ambiguity of the choices you make." *–Tomek Gop*

"No," says Gop, of course. While the majority of the team were still knocking *The Witcher* into shape, a small cadre of tech wizards went to work on the engine and tools to ensure there was a ready-made scaffold. Production has been smoother as a result.

"We're already scripting the game, we're already implementing everything; we have the assets and the storyline," says Gop. "There's always trouble you don't expect, but we have a lot of time for unseen things."

Implementation has become far easier for the designers, he tells us. Dialogue trees are now cobbled together without the need to bother codemonkeys; a smoother pipeline for scripting and design changes means *Witcher 2*'s can make use of more complex story interactions.

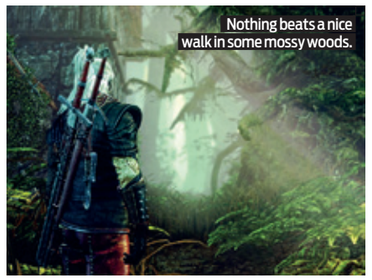
Choose wisely

"I think the story that we've written for *The Witcher 2* is definitely bigger scale," Gop says. "Whenever you make a choice or do anything, you will see that it influences a lot more than one or two people—it might change history. We really pride ourselves on the moral ambiguity of the choices you make. We don't put them in the game because we have to have ten choices per chapter, we just think that they naturally fit into the story that we've created. And the difference in *The Witcher 2* is that the world is going to change a lot more in the second part, depending on your choices. Places will look really, really different due to your actions in previous chapters."

Gop promises large-scale conflicts, with returning anti-hero Geralt now finding himself unwillingly embroiled in struggles between kingdoms across the continent. Although hesitant to get involved in politics, Geralt's Witcher abilities inevitably thrust him onto the world stage. Having saved King Foltest from assassination at the conclusion of the previous game, he's forced into His Majesty's service, traveling through the land of Temeria on a mission to restore order.

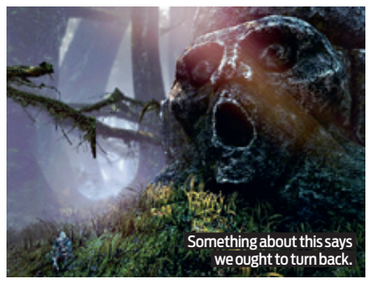
"We saw at the end of the first

Among your new enemies in *The Witcher 2*: the evilest of Pokémon.



Nothing beats a nice walk in some mossy woods.

The interiors are every bit as detailed as the outdoors.



Something about this says we ought to turn back.

game that the would-be assassin had things that made him look like a Witcher," says Gop. "Geralt doesn't like that he can't immediately pursue this thread of Witcher-like killers. But you don't say no to a King, right? The King travels all around Temeria, removing all signs of the Flaming Rose rebellion. You start the second game in La Valette Castle, the last part of Temeria to have order restored, where a female baron is trying to claim independence. Sooner or later, things happen that make Geralt come back to the Witcher-like assassins; the main thread of the game is about who they are."

But the game's story won't be taking Geralt back to familiar places, if only because the technology driving *Witcher 2* allows for grander locations. Returning to the scenes and landmarks of the first title would feel incongruously cramped.

"We're definitely thinking on a much bigger scale," says Gop, suggesting that a single environment from the first game could fit within one from the sequel many times over. "When you move through different parts of the city, you're not loading between them. And when you walk into an interior, you don't load either. It's right there when you open the door," he enthuses.

Even if Geralt steers clear of his usual haunts, there will be a few familiar faces. Saucy sorceress Triss will return (spot her glowing fingertips just a few inches above), along with Dandelion the Bard and Zoltan the Dwarf. Fans of the books the game was based on should recognize a number of the new names, too. But we're most interested in how CD Projekt intends to deal with the ladyfolk. Will *The Witcher 2* again indulge Geralt's romantic aspirations in the form of an unsexy collect-a-shag minigame?

The women now are for more than just fumbling.

"We've definitely redesigned the presentational aspects of the mature content," says Gop. No more porno playing cards depicting our female conquests, then. But romance remains a big part, with sex and relationships taking on a sophistication that finally justifies the developers claim of maturity.

"We still believe this part of the game is a way of expressing things as fundamental as combat," says Gop. He won't be drawn further, but he has this to say about your interaction with NPCs in general: "The attitude of the people and the societies that you travel through are going to be different depending on the way you choose to progress. But it's not like particular points in the story make you good or bad with certain groups of people. It's more about the attitude that you show them when you walk by or when you talk to them."

Polish polish

CD Projekt's experience honing the first game has given them plenty to think about regarding ergonomic design. Some of the original's more tortuous systems have been straightened out, says Gop.

"We've made the combat system smoother," he says. "It's not as visible when you're changing your combat stance. You had these combo sequences previously, and

Will *The Witcher 2* again indulge Geralt's romantic aspirations in the form of an unsexy collect-a-shag minigame?

if you changed stance, you had to start the sequence from the beginning. You had to decide first what kind of combat stance you used against certain kinds of opponents. We're trying to do it differently this time. We still have distinct kinds of fighting that you can utilize and a distinction between fast and strong opponents, but you now have a lot of ways to mix them together without breaking the flow of the combat. You're not going to break the combo of your strikes if you just mash buttons, but if you want a more tactical approach to combat, it's still going to be there. You'll also be able to combine the keystrokes to add some variety to your combat, using magic or throwing something. There will be a lot of possibilities."

Similarly, the character progression system has been reappraised.

"It has more options, but it's easier to navigate," says Gop. "Previously, you were developing a lot of separate things: combat styles, magical skills and so on. We have fewer categories of skill right now, but we're building a lot to choose from within those fewer groups."

Potion creation has become less pedantic— it's now simply a matter of collecting the right ingredients, doing away with the makework minigame in which you boiled all the parts together. The inventory has been streamlined as well.

Stripping out *The Witcher*'s more fiddlesome aspects is a welcome thing, but we wonder if some of these changes are a side effect of compromise for console support. Gop is adamant that no change here is detrimental and that *The Witcher 2*, though intended for a console port some time in the far future, is first and foremost a PC game.

"It's definitely wise to design an interface that keeps the gamepad in mind," Gop explains. "But considering the easier navigation we've implemented, I don't think we're compromising anything. We can already plug the gamepad controller to the PC and use it in our game, but we've not spent a lot of time on the design interface for the console."

But bless their multicultural hearts, CD Projekt is spending more time on an English-localized version. It's bad news for the developer's native country of Poland, but the game has been built with English as its primary language—we hope that means that even more of the grim folklore-fantasy *Witcher* is based on will seep into the script.

After months of post-release retrofitting for the first *Witcher*, CD Projekt seems better prepared to realize the ambitious, genuinely adult RPG that its game so nearly was. Here's hoping that this time around, the only edition that they really need to release is the first. ■

Martin Davies

Release SPRING 2011

Endgame How did *The Witcher* end?

ORDER OF THE FLAMING ROSE

1 If you favor the Order, you help wipe out the non-human freedom fighters of the Scoia'tael and leave the realm under the influence of the Order's new Grand Master, Siegfried. This possibility is the only one that totally contradicts the game's premise.

SCOIA'TAEL

2 Sticking up for the nonhumans, you reveal the Order as a mad cult. Although the king pardons the Scoia'tael for helping to defeat it, they reject the newly formed peace and go back to banditry, just about allowing a segue into the uneasy opening of the sequel.

NEUTRAL

3 The canonical path sees you fight both the forces of Scoia'tael and the Order. Temeria descends into chaos as the king plays off one side against the other. In all endings, you gruesomely defeat a would-be assassin, whose eyes have the telltale cat-like appearance of a Witcher.

As a ghost hunter, you can torment your fellow Sims even after you've locked them in a closet until they starve to death.

THE SIMS 3: AMBITIONS

HANDS-ON *The Sims* meets *Ghostbusters, What Not To Wear, Magnum PI* and *Backdraft*

Architecture: "Yeah, that should be big enough."

Unless your Sims are unemployed mooches, when they go to work, they simply disappear inside a building for a few hours, leaving you with nothing to do but fast-forward until they return home tired, hungry and only slightly wealthier. What I've played of *Ambitions* so far breaks that rule, making it potentially the biggest shift in the way we play since *The Sims 3* freed us from a single lot.

Ambitions' new occupations let us play a more active role in our Sims' professional lives and more directly impact the lives of other Sims. I enjoyed the simple-but-goofy ghost hunter profession—an homage to the *Ghostbusters* films. My Sim changed into slime-stained coveralls and responded to calls from around town, capturing poltergeists and exorcising possessed furniture. It boils down to clicking on a ghost to tell your Sim to capture it with his proton pack, but in the novelty alone made the first few stages fun.

Switching to a trenchcoat-and-fedora-wearing private investigator, I did a couple of legally questionable PI jobs found on my Sim's PC: In one, a Sim asked me to improve her credit score by hacking into a database; in the next, I was tasked with rooting through a neighbor's trash and mail to find incriminating evidence. Then, as I tried out the fashion and architect professions, my wife shoved me out of the way and seized the controls. The more creative assignments in these jobs make use of her favorite parts of the game: As a fashion consultant she convinced Sims to let her give them makeovers, switching to the editor to have her way with their hair, makeup, clothing and even the new tattoos (or you can just push the Give Bad Makeover button for a randomized, hideous result). In architecture, a Sim hired her to build him a new home gym, meeting equipment requirements while sticking to a budget.

I was having way too much fun making my Sim slide down the pole at the fire station.

The single biggest impact I made on other Sims' lives was by being bad at the firefighter profession. I was having way too much fun making my Sim slide down the pole at the fire station (where he lives while on duty) to bother putting out the raging fire that consumed my neighbor's duplex. Oops.

Like everything else in *The Sims 3*, the job quests aren't challenging—usually you'll be told exactly where to go and what to do—but it made me feel far more in control of my Sims' job progression than simply making sure they'd slept, showered, peed and eaten before going to work in the morning. ■

Dan Stapleton

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It's got six cores—but it only needs *one* to kill you

They're here, and there's no place to hide. Systems with Intel's six-core Core i7-980X "Gulftown" processors are crushing benchmarks all over America and taming even the biggest resource-hogging games. Now you can own one, too, thanks to Intel and iBuypower! They're teaming up with *PC Gamer* to give away a free system based on Intel's powerhouse Core i7-980X. Intel says, "We're excited to see what creativity can be unleashed by this processor, and we're happy to support the enthusiast community with contests like this to stoke the fires of tech passion. Check out www.intel.com/products/processor/corei7ee/index.htm and www.ibuypower.com for more on these great new products."

To enter to win this monstrous $3,000 rig, simply sign up as a fan on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pcgamermagazine by June 15, 2010. If you're already a fan, you're already entered to win! We'll select a winner at random on June 16. That's it!

THE SYSTEM: Case Chimera Inferno 2 Gaming Tower Case (Flame) **Processor** Intel® Core™ i7 980X Gulftown **Cooling** Liquid CPU Cooling System w/ 120mm Radiator [SOCKET-1366] **Memory** 6 GB [2 GB X3] DDR3-1600 Triple Memory Module (Corsair or major brand) **Videocard** ATI Radeon HD 5770 1GB-Single Card **Motherboard** Intel DX58SO **Motherboard Add-on** ASUSU3S6 True USB 3.0 & SATA 3.0 PCI-E x4 expansion card **Power Supply** 800 watt, SLI-ready **Storage** 80GB Intel X25-M MLC SSD, 1TB HD **Optical Drive** 8X LG Blu-ray rewriter **OS** Microsoft Windows 7 Home Premium **Value** $2,999.00 (with tax and shipping)

SHOOTER SHOWDOWN

This summer kicks off an epic season of mayhem with five groundbreaking shooters. *PC Gamer* gets behind the crosshairs

Maximum Force

CRYSIS 2 has a new way of making aliens fun to destroy ***by Tom Francis***

Back in 2004, Crytek made *Far Cry*. An extraordinary-looking tropical shooter that was great fun when stalking hammily-acted mercenaries, but kind of a slog once the mutants showed up.

In 2007, it made *Crysis*. An extraordinary-looking jungle shooter that was great fun when stalking the paranoid Koreans, but lost its sense of freedom once the aliens showed up.

In 2010 Crytek is making *Crysis 2*. An impressive-looking urban shooter that seems to be great fun when stalking private military troops...and then the space robots show up.

That moment is what it will all come down to. *Crysis 2* is trying a lot of different things: moving its jungle combat to New York City, bringing the game to consoles for the first time, rethinking its approach to story by hiring an established sci-fi writer and reinventing the Nanosuit. But its most crucial goal is the one that it's never achieved before: designing a monster that's fun to fight.

These aliens, who wear mechanized suits that make them look like robots, have to be as entertaining to hunt and evade as Crytek's human opponents, or we'll all be left wondering why it keeps doing this to itself.

"I'm not giving up on them!" says CEO Cevat Yerli defiantly, when I point out they've always been the least popular element of their games. "We could have made some easy choices, saying we don't make any aliens in a game and just make human AI. But no, I am a believer that our alien AI is going to be better than our human AI. And I'm gonna fight this battle to the end."

Both *Far Cry*'s pounce-happy mutants and *Crysis*' floating aliens shared something that *Crysis 2*'s monsters won't. They operated on their own custom AI, developed separately from the (excellent) human AI. With each, Crytek couldn't devote as much development time to making the nasties as fun to outsmart as the humans, who featured more strongly.

"This time I said I wanted one kick-ass AI system that runs everything, human or alien."

Yerli explains: "The counterpart of making very different aliens in *Crysis* meant that they were inconsistent with our technology for the humans. The humans had superior AI technology: they could sense better, they could react better. All of that was lost on the aliens because we had three different AI systems running in parallel."

Crytek's solution, thankfully, wasn't to reverse its priorities. It's still putting all the work into human smarts. But this time, the aliens themselves are compatible with it. "This time," says Yerli, "I said I wanted one kick-ass AI system that runs everything, human or alien. But we have behaviors and styles and other attributes that allow me to say, 'this is a human, this is an alien.'"

The visual motif—chunky, stompy, supremely heavy robots—is an attempt to relate the aliens to their surroundings. "If I look out at the street," says Yerli, gesturing toward NYC's Avenue of the Americas behind us, "what's threatening here? The only danger you have is being hit by a car. So it's technology and speed and metal and power endangering you." That led directly to the new aliens. "We picked a very metallic technological look and tried to be materially consistent, but also gave them a unique feel of organic and metallic symbiosis."

In action, these mech-like, armored extra-terrestrials barrel around with intimidating force. They slam into the earth like meteors, then stomp out of the dust cloud spitting automatic fire. They can charge you, knock cars around and duck out of danger when you return fire. But most importantly, all of that intimidating force is left with nowhere to go if you vanish in Stealth mode. These are aliens you can outwit.

I mention to Yerli that what's always appealed to me about fighting humans in Crytek games is getting the jump on them: because they go down quickly, I can take them out cleanly and move on without taking fire. I couldn't do that with the aliens.

"That's exactly what's resolved," Yerli pipes up enthusiastically. "You're going to be able to do that—if you're smart

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER Crytek
RELEASE Holiday 2010
LINK sosnewyork.com

In the New York City of the 2030s, this is rush hour.

Oh no, I can see my feet—does that mean death beckons?

Shooting stuff up in soft focus somehow makes it feel more artful.

Looking down the barrel of a whole lot of explosion.

enough about it. You couldn't outsmart the alien in *Crysis*, as it was really about skill, not thinking. And in *Far Cry*, you saw the mutants and you thought, 'F***.' Shoot as much as you can, then pull back."

Stealth and safety

For the most part, that was the the same tactical approach Producer Nathan Camarillo took when he fought these new aliens during our demonstration. They'd dropped from the sky all around him, so he had little chance to take cover or plan his attack. But toward the end of the playthrough, he cloaked and restrategized. Yerli says he could have played the whole encounter this way.

"Camarillo showed a glimpse of it, by going Stealth, going around, then going up very close and just [Makes pump-action shotgun noises]. And yeah, it took two shots, but it was an intelligent way of moving against an alien. That is the key thing, that you can toy around with the alien."

In *Crysis*, Stealth was one of four modes you could set your suit to—personally, I spent about 80 percent of my game time completely invisible. Crytek took notice of this, and identified two prevalent styles of play: leaning heavily on Stealth mode, or the self-healing juggernaut that was Armor mode.

So in *Crysis 2*, you're always in one of those two modes. They're the only mutually exclusive ones: pick either Stealth or Armor, then add whatever else you want on top of it. It leads to a more creative system where you're thinking about which modes to combine rather than simply which mode to pick.

Mode duration has also been extended. "We want to prolong the Stealth experience," says Yerli. "You can stay stealthed for longer than in *Crysis*." Armor isn't finalized yet, but the current plan is to scrap Crysis' system of draining energy points when you're hit, in favor of a more durable one. Yerli: "It's temporary invulnerability. We're experimenting with a five-second window where you're invulnerable."

Power and the glory

The other two modes, Tactics and Power, are new but composed of familiar elements. Tactics is initially just built-in binoculars. Any enemies you see are permanently tracked on your minimap in that rather satisfying, strategically handy way pioneered by *Far Cry*, and sensors let you hear enemy movements and conversations at long range. "There's much more behind that," says Yerli, but Crytek isn't talking about it yet.

Power is a happy marriage of the Speed and Strength modes of *Crysis*: you run fast, jump high, punch hard, lift anything and throw it with lethal force. Crytek also suggested that Power would allow you to pull yourself up onto ledges, and that "it might play in with some interaction with aliens."

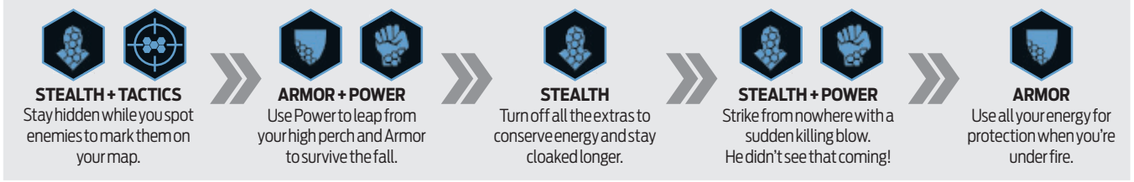
Perhaps the most interesting change to the Nanosuit, though, is that you can choose how to enhance it as you play. "Over time,"

The first game got screwed by piracy and by its own ridiculous technical requirements.

Yerli explains, "within a mode, you get certain extra functionality. So you will have a different Nanosuit based on how you assign your in-game unlock currency."

The only one he'd confirm is the one I spotted during the demonstration: the ability to see enemies though walls as faint green blobs at medium range. It's an unlockable extra for Stealth mode. "They push the gameplay away from the core in a more effective way," says Camarillo. "You're

NANOSUIT 2 Using the suit's new mix-and-match modes



stealthing, and it makes you more powerful in Stealth mode. They enhance the style of play that you're doing."

My favorite thing about the new mix-and-match suit modes system is likely going to be mixing Stealth and Power—a guard stand-ing next to a steel lamp post may now find it snapped off by invisible hands a second before he's bludgeoned to death with it. Grabbing and throwing objects was one of *Crysis*' silliest and most unusual features: you could whack people with everything from a banana to a chicken. I'm happy to report that it's staying firmly in, despite the tricky coding it requires.

"It's one of the things that presents a much more technical challenge than you can imagine," says Yerli. He recounts the recurring conversation between him and the programmers.

"We have to have it."

"Do you understand how much more complicated it is on a console? On PC it's fine, but on a console?"

"Well, we're going to have it."

This is particularly nice to hear for anyone worried that co-development for consoles would cramp the *Crysis* style. Because however you spin it, Crytek's primary reason for making this game is not to advance PC gaming. It's to make *Crysis* multiplatform, because the first game got screwed by piracy and by its own ridiculous technical requirements. That's only a problem if the PC version is going to suffer for it, so the fact that they're not compromising even on frivolities like chicken-chucking is encouraging.

Technologically, it's harder to judge. "We're making the most advanced game on the planet," Yerli says, but don't expect that to translate to the kind of generational leap forward in graphics that Crytek has become-known for. Their progress has been in subtler techniques that give them dynamic control of an area's look.

"We have color grading now," says Camarillo. It's a technique previously only used by film and television, to alter the colors of a scene to evoke a particular mood. "So we can change the way a game space feels even in the context of what's going on in it. As you first get to New York, you expect it to have this bright sunny feel. It's a city, but you see that it's scarred or damaged in some way. As

Start spreading the news, we're leaving today...

...I'm going to blow up a part of it, New York, New York.

The cityscape is much more expansive than a claustrophobic jungle setting.

you get into the city, you start to feel a little bit more despair. But all through one set of assets. We change the color grading and time of day, and it's a really powerful tool."

"Then, when the aliens arrive, we add in some particles to make the air thicker, and we change the color grading," he explains, "and all of a sudden the air feels really toxic, the sky feels really oppressive and everything is really choking in the the atmosphere. We do this in real-time, and this lets us enhance the storytelling."

Despite all this, most of us aren't interested in another colossal advance in mipmapped pseudoshaders: we've only just got a rig that can run the last one smoothly. In fact, even if you can't run *Crysis* well, three years on, there's hope.

Future tech

"The focus on console tech helped us improve a lot of PC tech as well." Yerli says. "When you have two milliseconds of processor time running lights, you need to get that down to a millisecond—how do you do that? Whatever you do on console actually applies on PC as well, finally. The GPUs are more or less the same."

Did Crytek move its game from dense jungle to the relatively simple blocks of a modern metropolis to get it running well on consoles? Camarillo says no.

"Picking New York was not about constraints and challenges. It was about trying to see opportunities. The challenge of technology is also an opportunity for better simulation. Like when you jump on a car and you see the car dent beneath you—that's cool, man. If an alien jumps on a building or smashes a car and throws it at you: awesome."

Mid air, he switched to Stealth and landed with a loud but invisible smack.

"In a lot of ways, making a city is more difficult," says Camarillo. "There are some tricks we did in *Crysis* to make the jungle feel really dense and look like it continued forever. Cities have long canyon views, so there are challenges that come with having to render really long distances." Camarillo says the setting hasn't shrunk the scale of the game, either. "We've even taken some of the levels that we built here and a level from *Crysis* and smacked them on top of each other, and gone 'Wow, that really is the same size.'"

A ruined city isn't exactly a novel environment for a shooter, but it is a novel environment for *Crysis*. Where other shooters thrive on corridors and confined spaces—namely streets—*Far Cry* and *Crysis* depended on wide-open spaces for their tactical cat and mouse.

Crytek calls it the *veni, vidi, vici* approach: letting the player see a hostile situation long before he enters it, and choosing an angle of attack based on the positions of the enemies he's spotted. If you turn the corner of 15th and Madison and get shot in the face, that whole process is lost. So how the hell is this going to work?

The high life

The answer was clear in the first few seconds of seeing *Crysis 2* played in the flesh: height.

"It's difficult because, yes, you have confined spaces," Yerli concedes this problem. "But in confined spaces there is opportunity for verticality. So we're extending the sandbox into a third dimension—from a flat *Crysis/Far Cry* style to a layered style."

From a jagged hole in a tall and towering skyscraper, Camarillo flicked to Tactics mode, zoomed in and scanned the rooftops of two lower buildings nearby for CryNet private military troops. When you need an overview, you get on top of the tallest building. This tells you all you need to know. High up is the new far away.

The difference is that once you've scoped the situation and picked an approach, the distance is easier to close. Rather than creeping through the jungle for minutes on end, you can just jump. Picking a corner of the lower rooftop away from the guards, Camarillo activated Power mode and took a superhuman running leap from his perch. Mid air, he switched to Stealth and landed with a loud, but invisible smack.

From there, it's *Crysis* as usual: slowly stalking unwitting guards and taking them out with sudden bursts of pleasingly hectic violence—with the help of a new instant kill move you can perform from Stealth.

The guards, as mentioned, are CryNet's own private military company. The aliens are the main threat, but CryNet have some beef with you that Crytek isn't ready to talk about yet. I heard their troops refer to "this suit guy—Prophet or whatever he's called," suggesting to me that you play as your commanding officer from the first game. "It's not as simple as that," says writer Richard Morgan. "There'll be some intrigue concerning that name," is all Camarillo will say.

Crysis ended on a slightly frustrating cliff hanger. Prophet had headed back to the frozen island on an unknown excursion and was still alive in there. But *Crysis 2* is set three years later, so it won't be picking up that story thread directly. Morgan says he's scripting a comic book that will bridge the gap, but I'm still left wondering why they botched the ending of *Crysis* for that.

Of course, the ending of *Crysis*—the end *half*, in fact—was botched before that by a long series of restrictive set pieces. A confusing alien ship, a tiresome mounted-gun ride, an arduous boss-fight, a shoddy flying section. After so many great open-ended levels, it wore thin fast.

"It's a fair criticism," says Yerli honestly when I put this to him. "What can I say? We won't do it again." He thinks the problem was partly to do with time. "It looked like you were halfway through the game. Originally, that was the plan—we would have

STORY vs FREEDOM Writer Richard Morgan says story can't be optional

RICHARD MORGAN
"In consumers and people who make videogames, there is an unwillingness to confront a narrative truth, which is: You can't have a totally open-world game and a compelling narrative because, by definition, a compelling narrative forces you to do things. If your narrative is going to allow you to wander around and do what you want, by its very definition it can't compel."

"There's a failure to get the point here in a lot of the gaming community. 'I want total freedom,' they say. Well, why do they? It's like being given a book that doesn't have the chapters pasted in yet—you just stick the pages in yourself, however you fancy. That's not why you buy a book. And if you just want a space in which to wander about doing whatever the hell you want, you don't really want a game."

PC GAMER'S TAKE
"Force" is not the only definition of "compel." A story can be compelling simply by being interesting, and that's by no means impossible in an open world. *Fallout 3*'s a great example of how you can put compelling stories into a world without forcing the player to play them. Wandering around doing what you want is a valid way to play, and what you do can lead to a completely fascinating story.

more on the back end. But we had to close up, fictionally, and the only way to do it in a meaningful way was to narrow down some of those experiences."

"It was quite a tough mistake," he admits. "A big one."

With *Crysis 2*, they've gone all out on story. They've moved the whole game to New York, mainly, they say, to give the plot more resonance.

To me, to you

They've hired a skilled science fiction author to write it—and not just to submit a script. Richard Morgan, author of *Altered Carbon*, has moved to Crytek's home base of Frankfurt to oversee the game's development and provide constant input on how the levels are structured to tell the tale.

"These things need to work together," Morgan says. "So you sit down and have a meeting with the guys who are designing a level and they say, 'We're going to do this… we want you to move in this direction.' It's my job, then, to say, 'Yeah, see, that's gonna break the fiction.' So what's the solution to that? We can rejig the fiction a little bit so there's a need to go over there, or occasionally, we modify the game dynamic so that before you go there, you have to do something over here. Then I can feed in a bit of fiction to support that."

Morgan says the process isn't a straight trade-off. "It's not a question of 'I'll give you a bit of my story if you give me a bit of your gameplay'. It's very much about what the end product will look like. We're going to bend everything to fit that."

Can making aliens less alien make them more fun to fight?

It's about making story a thread throughout the game, rather than bunching it all up in an onslaught of barely interactive cinematics in the second half. That's not something either Crytek or Richard Morgan can claim any solid experience with, nor something we can judge at this early stage, so it'll be interesting to see how it turns out.

On every front, *Crysis 2* is an experiment. Can a style of game evolved to work in the jungle survive emigration to a metropolis? Is verticality a good substitute for wide open spaces? Can making aliens less alien make them more fun to fight? And can they really solve *Crysis*'s late-game linearity problems by working in *more* story instead of less?

From seeing the game played and talking to its creators, my feelings are mixed. I'm skeptical that these levels will feel as open as the jungles we loved, skeptical that the aliens can be as fun as humans to prey on and skeptical that they can make me care about the plot. But I am convinced that skyscrapers make an interesting playground for a soldier with super powers, that combining Nanosuit modes and evolving them to your tastes could be really creative and fun to play around with, and that they can fix the pacing problems that plagued the *Crysis* finale. And since console limitations will leave plenty of overhead for *Crysis 2* to run nicely on reasonable machines at even higher resolutions, that's more than enough to get me excited. ■

Elerium is a vital resource. You'll want to capture and research it to upgrade your squad.

Wander around familiar New York settings—and smash them up!

They're Back

Classic strategy game **XCOM** is reborn as a shooter unlike anything we've seen before ***by Alec Meer***

You can start believing. It's true. Oh God, it's true.

X-COM, the 1994 sci-fi strategy/action/roleplaying hybrid that is often considered the PC's finest hour, is back. But it's no longer a turn-based squad game set in the near future. You don't fly airplanes, you don't seek out new threats underwater. Nor do you order 12 little pixelated men into the dark recesses of a crashed alien spaceship. No.

The new *XCOM* (no hyphen) is a first-person shooter, set in the 1950s.

Deep breath. This is not a time to panic.

READ ME
PUBLISHER 2K
DEVELOPER 2K Marin
RELEASE 2011
LINK xcom.com

This alien invasion is an occasion to celebrate. Consider what those original strategy games were about: An implacable alien menace threatened the world. You were in charge of an agency that investigated these otherworldly horrors, engaged them in direct combat when it could find them, and poured vast funds and research into developing and improving countermeasures.

You step into the shiny shoes of FBI agent William Carter, head of a secret taskforce.

That's exactly what *XCOM* does. You step into the shiny shoes of FBI agent William Carter, head of a secret taskforce that is Earth's last and only line of defense against the scum of the universe. From its underground base, this newly-formed XCOM monitors reports of alien sightings, and dispatches agents to snoop around, gather evidence and, if necessary, clean up.

This isn't a linear shooter, either. Your base's phonetappers and police-radio scanners present you with choices as to where to

We'd like to see Norman Rockwell paint *this*.

go next and what to do, selected from a large map of the United States. Rumors of animal attacks and strange weather patterns in a certain state? Sounds like blobs are on the rampage. Saddle up, Agent Carter. Grab the wheel of your hulking fedmobile, take two of your best men with you and go see what's going on.

You can't hide

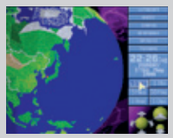
Welcome to suburbia. Clean lines, pastel colors, immaculate lawns, polite neighbors and tranquillity. This is an idealized vision of the 1950s that might have come right out of *Leave it to Beaver*.

"It's a world where people feel comfortable and everything is optimistic," says *XCOM*'s design director Jonathan Pelling. "They feel that there is a great future ahead."

It's the '50s as depicted in the advertising of the time, by such artists as Norman Rockwell. He was a key inspiration for *Team Fortress 2*'s art style—so should we expect something similarly exaggerated? "We definitely did a lot of exploring with how far we could push that stylization, but I guess we're making a first-person shooter, and there's a certain kind of level of frugality that that genre requires." A more recent touchstone is AMC's early '60s advertising industry drama, *Mad Men*. Just like in that show, the tranquility is only skin deep. This place is perfect for a family. So...where are the families?

Well, how about that guy on the lawn?

ENEMY KNOWN *XCOM* (2010) versus *X-COM* (1994)



BASE-BUILDING
THEN Construct a fortress of UFO detection and assault anywhere in the world. Upgrade it with new structures and features as you develop them.

NOW One fixed secret base, hidden underneath an abandoned hangar. It will expand, but we're not being told how.

SCENERY THEN
Almost any wall can be taken down with the right weapon. Everything is laid out on an orderly, artificial grid. Room contents are trashable.

NOW No confirmation of destructible walls yet, but 2K hints that there's a reason some of them look a little flat and featureless...

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
THEN Constant invention and creation of new weapons, armor and tanks, and experimentation on captured aliens.

NOW 2K Marin states your arsenal will start off human, but become more alien in form and function as you gather new intel.

SQUAD SETUP
THEN Complete control of the actions and inventory of a large squad of soldiers. But it's turn-based.

NOW At least two autonomous dudes in sharp suits following you around. It's real-time, but they need rescuing a lot. There's more to be shown here—maybe co-op?

VEHICLES
THEN Fighter jets and airborne troop carriers, and eventually your own flying saucers capable of interplanetary travel.

NOW Um, a car. Just the one. But it's called the Interceptor! 2K hints there may be more to this. The Titans are capable of teleportation, for instance.

HAIRCUTS
THEN Highly gelled 1980s superstructures. They looked achingly futuristic at the time.

NOW Short, sensible hair, trimmed above the collar, ideally kept under a fedora and controlled with a generous helping of Brylcreem. You're representing Uncle Sam, after all.

"Ward, I think there's something wrong with the Beaver."

Beautiful sunset, or doomy sign of an impending invasion?

You said you wanted destructible scenery, you got destructible scenery.

Oh, don't worry about his nightmarishly contorted features, the way his clothes are gently smoldering and that circle of black ichor around him. Look, he was taking a lovely photo with his delightful period camera! Or at least he was before something covered him in a thick, oily substance and choked him to death. Or what about that fresh-faced young couple over there? They're just back from buying groceries. Groceries that are now scattered all over the driveway, while they lie slumped across the dashboard of their car.

Keep calm and carry on. Take out your camera and record all this—you need the evidence, because evidence means more funding and research. Silently snap a picture of every corpse you see, every demolished hedge, every slime trail. Bring out your blob detector, a vial of black alien goo which chirps and clicks whenever it senses the same substance nearby. Follow its lead. Bam! A shapeless, dark mass bursts out of nowhere and promptly wraps itself around the head of one of the two agents you've brought with you. As he flails desperately, this tiny cyclone of murderous oil tries to shove long tendrils of itself down his throat. Reach for your shotgun, aim carefully, fire. The thing falls to the ground, and the agent breathes again, gratefully. The three of you turn to move on, but already the scattered gobbets of the blob are crawling toward each other, a liquid nightmare reforming itself before your eyes, ready to kill again. Your shotgun is no good here. It's not so much knife-to-a-gunfight as it is teaspoon-to-a-tank-fight.

Bam! A shapeless, dark mass bursts out of nowhere and promptly wraps itself around the head of your agent.

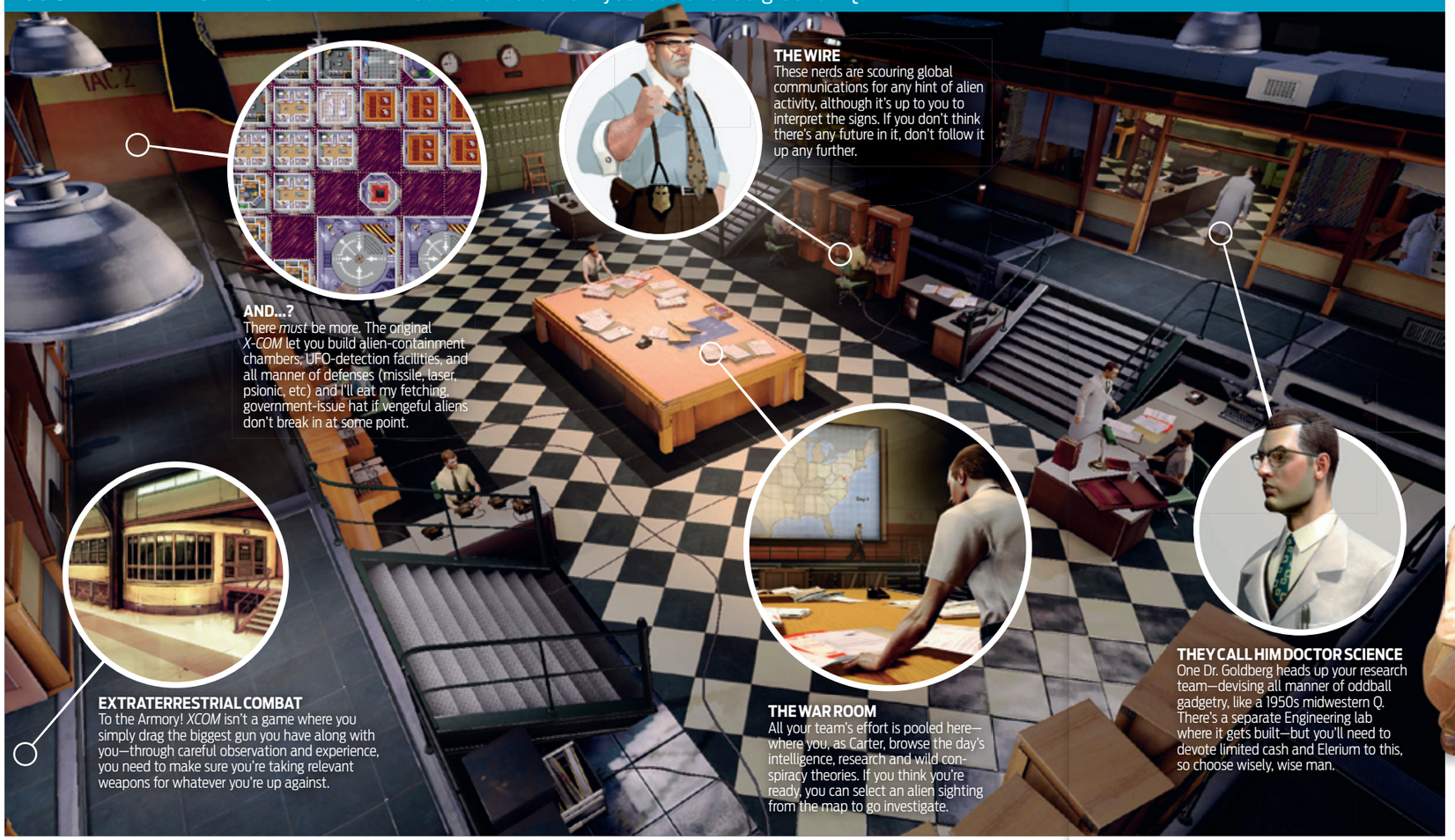
Blobstruction

Fortunately, you've met these before. You don't have to cut and run, not like last time. Thanks to the data you've acquired in previous missions, your researchers have constructed a special anti-blob grenade. It's a glass jar sloshing with oil and wired up with homemade circuitry—if Radio Shack sold Molotov cocktails, they'd look like this. Burn, alien blobs, burn.

What now? Your goal here isn't to kill every alien in the place. *XCOM* doesn't work like that. It's incredibly unlikely that you'll comb every area of one of its wide-open mission maps, as health, ammo and armor are strictly limited to whatever you brought in with you. If your bullets—or, more pertinently, those flame grenades—are in short supply, you won't be able to hold out much longer. The alien presence grows and grows the longer you stay, so you need to make a judgement call between trying to gather more evidence and simply staying alive. Your car's just down the road—you could leave right now, knowing the photos you've taken and notes you've scribbled will still be some use in establishing the nature of this enemy unknown. But that would make you a big wet wimp.

Also, there's Elerium here somewhere. This incredibly rare alien element is crucial for the construction of new weapons, armor and gadgets, but seizing it involves enormous risk. Out in the back of one picturesque

COUNTER-TERROR FROM THE DEEP Save the world from your secret underground HQ



AND...?
There *must* be more. The original *X-COM* let you build alien-containment chambers, UFO-detection facilities, and all manner of defenses (missile, laser, psionic, etc) and I'll eat my fetching, government-issue hat if vengeful aliens don't break in at some point.

THE WIRE
These nerds are scouring global communications for any hint of alien activity, although it's up to you to interpret the signs. If you don't think there's any future in it, don't follow it up any further.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL COMBAT
To the Armory! *XCOM* isn't a game where you simply drag the biggest gun you have along with you—through careful observation and experience, you need to make sure you're taking relevant weapons for whatever you're up against.

THE WAR ROOM
All your team's effort is pooled here—where you, as Carter, browse the day's intelligence, research and wild conspiracy theories. If you think you're ready, you can select an alien sighting from the map to go investigate.

THEY CALL HIM DOCTOR SCIENCE
One Dr. Goldberg heads up your research team—devising all manner of oddball gadgetry, like a 1950s midwestern Q. There's a separate Engineering lab where it gets built—but you'll need to devote limited cash and Elerium to this, so choose wisely, wise man.

Notice how the blob is starting to form tentacles as it reaches for hatman here.

Alien attack, or did Betty hit the liquor cabinet again?

In another *BioShock* nod, photography is how you gather evidence on the silent invasion.

suburban house you spy a block of it—a strange arrangement of cubes, hovering in midair. Dark lines and shapes whip around it in a self-contained storm, meaning you can't just grab the thing. More blobs. You'll need to take them down if you want this precious spacerock. Check health, check ammo, check grenades. Every shot counts.

By the time it's over, both your agents are asphyxiated, smoldering corpses, and the formerly pristine house is a mess of scorched walls, shattered windows and broken furniture. You have your Elerium, but at what cost? It's probably time to get out of here, but you know full well you've explored barely a third of this area. There's always more evidence, more aliens, more Elerium. Maybe it's worth persevering just a little longer.... And that's when the sky splits in two.

Stanley Kubrick's psychedelic nightmares are made flesh as an enormous monolith shudders out of the horizon, the accompanying mist and lightning blocking out the daylight. Before your eyes, this cubist deathmachine—is it a creature, a spacecraft, a building, all of the above?—transforms. First, into a ring of smaller, diamond-shaped artifacts, and then into two concentric rings, like a gaping metal maw. The rings *suck*. All the furniture of the house you're in is dragged toward it, smashing through what few windows remain. Run. Your guns have no effect here. *Run*.

Outside, reality seems to distort as the thing increases its power, carving a great furrow down the asphalt road. You're pushed and thrashed and bashed around as you try to get away, besieged from all sides by newly arrived blobs as well as by this hulking Titan. Honestly, you can't do anything about this. Not this time. You have to run, get to the Interceptor, get away while you still can. Maybe those eggheads back in the lab will be able to build you something, so next time you can bring this faceless horror down to Earth. But not this time. Run.

Block buster

I notice I've scribbled the word "apocalyptic" into my notepad while watching all this. It's surprising how poorly screenshots convey the scale and devastation of the monolith's arrival. Be assured that, in motion, it looks incredible. It also seems impossible that you could ever stop this thing—but you will. As in the original *X-COM*, your scientists and engineers will research and construct new technologies, which, in time, will mean encounters with increasingly powerful alien foes won't be suicide missions. Nor will they ever involve you looking for little green men. "One of the things that we wanted to move away from was the kitsch or the expected from these creatures," says Pelling. "Creating a set of enemies loaded with preconceptions really undermines the game. Part of the impact of seeing our aliens is that they're not bipedal things walking around, it's something completely different. We want you to look at them, study and explore them."

Well, for a little while. Again, you don't take on these missions expecting to snoop around every corner and execute every alien you find, but instead to gather as much evidence as you can before you *have* to leave. The better equipped you are, the longer you'll be able to stay.

This stay-or-go structure is a re-creation of the original *X-COM*'s missions. Yes, killing everything would have meant success, but that wasn't always possible. If half your team was dead and most of your ammo was spent, it was fruitless to hang around. Gather any alien tech and corpses you can, then get out of there. The difference here—and I think it's an improvement—is that you'll never end up in a situation where you know there's one elusive straggler hanging around somewhere, and you're in for hours of peering behind every door, into every alley, over every rooftop to find him. Instead, constant, gradual escalation means every mission will end on a high. Unless you get killed in the process. Chin up, Agent.

If you're an old *X-COM* fan, the key concern you've probably got is the AI-controlled backup agents, whom you'll notice didn't figure highly in the blob/Titan skirmish. Yeah, it's a bit worrisome—in what I've seen so far, they were little more than silent drones who could suppress but not finish enemies, and require an awful lot of rescuing. It's a far cry from the large, entirely controllable squads of the original *X-COM* trilogy, but apparently there's an lot yet to be shown in that regard. "It's really important to us that you feel strongly about the agents as you're playing the game," says Pelling. That's all he'll say for now, but it means that the deaths of your agents in the suburban encounter will not be without consequence. Somehow, you'll have developed these guys, equipped them, and thus have a vested interest in their survival.

Welcome to the Earth. Have a nice death ray.

XCOM: the game in which you will be terrified of oblongs.

Whether you'll be able to control them to any degree remains to be seen, but hopefully, we'll see some element of how you designated specialists in the original *X-COM*. Heavy weapons guy, psychic guy, heavily armored stunstick guy, etc. Clearly, the squad structure would make for an awesome co-op mode, too. 2K refuses to cough up any multiplayer details, but hell, at least they're not denying anything.

So, is this *XCOM* really connected to our beloved *X-COM*? "We're forging a new mythology, but what we're retaining are the core elements that made *X-COM X-COM*," says Pelling. "The strategy, the base, the research, agents, being in charge, and dealing with this problem as you see fit. You are the one who's driving the investigation—those elements remain, but we want to create a new world with a new set of enemies that's genuinely compelling for players to learn more about."

It's worth stating up front that the Gollop brothers, the fine fellows responsible for the original *X-COM*, are not involved—2K bought the license some years back. Instead, 2K Marin, the main team behind *BioShock 2*, is at the helm, bolstered by 2K's Australian studio (confusingly now renamed 2K Marin, too). It's an impressive pedigree: Pelling was part of Irrational Australia (before it was renamed 2K Australia or 2K Marin), and has worked on *Freedom Force*, *Tribes: Vengeance* and the original *BioShock*. The team also includes veterans of *Total War* and *Fallout*. Far from coming off as a console shooter that happens to be on PC, *XCOM* is a sprawling, tactical and clever thing and, if 2K nails it through the finish line, it could push big-budget shooters into the more open, freer realm we've always clamored for.

"We're really good at making shooters," says Pelling. "We've got a lot of experience doing that, and I think that provides a unique opportunity to present *XCOM* in a much more immersive and intimate format. Putting it into the first-person shooter is going to blow it up a little bit."

Period piece

The revised setting is going to be a sticking point for many *X-COM* fans, but makes a surprising amount of sense—the '50s were a time of a political paranoia, which was reflected in the "B" movies of the era. It also means the world is attractively stylized rather than grimly, tediously realistic, and the homemade, early-007 gadgets look like a hoot.

That said, it's hard not to notice that the *BioShock* guys are returning to the mid-20th century already. "The choice of the '50s was not about putting it into a specific time period—we don't have a set date for when the events of the game occurred," says Pelling. "It's more that we wanted to create a beautiful, idealized world for players to explore, and create this contrast between the horror of these beings and what is at stake. This is what life could or should be, whereas the infiltration of the aliens really destroys that."

Two locations and two aliens are all 2K have revealed so far, leaving the rest to speculation. As well as the game's mechanics—specifically, the NPC agents and the improvements to your base—the nature and intent of the aliens is the game's biggest secret. "We want to create a genuine mystery, one that players are compelled to find out more about, to unravel themselves." Again, *XCOM* nods to *X-COM*, where your researchers gradually unlocked the aliens' origins, how to stop them and where they came from. Unlike *X-COM*, however, these aliens aren't a mix of random species.

The blobs and Titans may be very different, but they're both faceless entities able to take on multiple forms. We can definitely expect more in that vein, says Pelling. "We can't talk too much about the specifics of each one, but for the overall approach we want to have consistency."

Expect an agonizing drip-feed of information ahead of *XCOM*'s mooted 2011 release. It's going to be painful. But we've waited this long, dealing with grotesque sequels, disappointing remakes and fan projects. *XCOM* may not be *X-COM* verbatim, but it's someone throwing money and talent at the concept, not leaving it stranded at the pointless poles of fan-exploitation or slavish re-creation.

X-COM was a game about investigating an alien invasion at your own speed, by your own means. So is *XCOM*. Start believing. ■

Meet your special new co-op companion: Paxton Fettel, your deceased, creepy, ghost of a brother.

Family Values

Is the scariest part of **F.E.A.R. 3** Alma's pregnancy, or co-op? ***by Evan Lahti***

"You're playing co-op with Hannibal Lecter." This is one of *F.E.A.R. 3*'s major selling points, and it has us enormously worried. Our favorite immersion-driven, single-player, slow-mo shooter franchise, now in the hands of a new developer, will have a *cooperative* campaign.

That co-op partner is Paxton Fettel—your dead, evil ghost-brother. You're still the world's most awkwardly named protagonist, the "Point Man." But now you're working with the creepy cannibal you killed near the end of the first *F.E.A.R.*, who's now "psychically connected" to your character as you both try to stop Alma, your mother, from bringing another child into the world.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive
DEVELOPER Day 1 Studios
RELEASE Winter
LINK whatisfear.com

Sibling rivalry

That unique family history, *F.E.A.R. 3*'s developers say, will make for unconventional co-op. "Fettel's ability to 'see' hidden passages that Point Man cannot is an example of this," says Frank Rooke, director of design at Day 1 Studios. "He can alert Point Man to the shortcut flanking the enemies, or he can make him face them head-on."

Day 1 demonstrates this during our co-op demo on two side-by-side monitors. We're in an industrial area, and Point Man has to work through a facility to reach a sniper perched in an advantageous location. If he's feeling helpful, Fettel can simply possess the sniper from the ground level and obtain the sniper position...and his fancy rifle.

Fettel's ability to possess enemies is a key co-op maneuver. "Not only do his possessions instantly render the enemy useless, but he gains the ability and weapons that the enemy wields," says Dan Hay, Senior Producer. Being incorporeal, Fettel can't pick up weapons by default. Possession changes that. "For example, if he possesses an Armacham soldier, he will get the armor and artillery power of that soldier. Fettel also has a stun blast, which temporarily paralyzes an enemy, as well as a levitation power, which allows him to levitate an enemy for a certain amount of time—perfect to hold an enemy still for Point Man to shoot."

Dynamic duo

The one unique enemy we went muzzle-to-muzzle with was one of evil corporation Armacham's tech-wielding lieutenants. "The Phase Caster can transport conventional soldiers to an encounter via phase portals. Players will have to eliminate the Phase Caster in order to stop waves of soldiers from being summoned into the battle," says Parker Hamilton, lead systems designer.

As a franchise, *F.E.A.R.* has leaned on unusual enemy and weapon design to create great action—but we're worried about the departure co-op could mean for the game's other touchstone: immersion. Co-op will be optional (single players won't be joined by an AI version of Fettel), but we're concerned that the design compromises necessary to accommodate two players could sway *F.E.A.R.*'s atmosphere, and promote action at the expense of tension, as was arguably the case in *Resident Evil 5* and *Left 4 Dead*. ■

Quadrupeds are always the least fun to fight. Damn their hunched silhouettes!

We're trying to figure out what this gun shoots. Tennis balls?

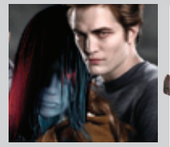
"We've found the recon team, sir. The New York Times sports section is our current suspect."

WHAT'S SCARIER THAN BABIES?

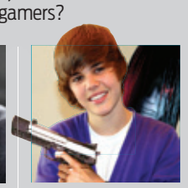
For maximum terror, *F.E.A.R. 3*'s writers created a plot intrinsically terrifying to gamers: pregnancy. Alma's ready to bring her demon-child into the world—a successful birth will wreak havoc on reality as we know it (as newborns often do). But we wonder: What other plot premises would've been equally unsettling for gamers?

MARRIAGE "Alma's biological clock is ticking. *Single* players beware! Fight through 14 levels of abandoned Vegas marriage drive-thrus and honeymoon resorts."
FEAR-O-METER: 9

MODERN WOMEN "This summer—Alma and her girlfriends are *totally* going shopping... for your soul. And a flashy pair of pumps. It's *Clueless* meets *Left 4 Dead*!"
FEAR-O-METER: 4



VAMPIRE ROMANCE "A firefight in a library exposes Alma's psyche to young-adult fiction. Fend off an army of emotionally-fragile vampires and shirtless werewolves to survive."
FEAR-O-METER: 6



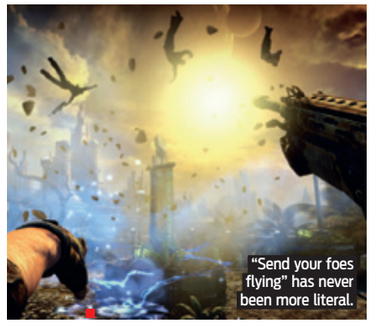
TEEN IDOLS "After defeating Point Man, Alma finds a new nemesis in a 16-year-old pop sensation. Only you, Justin Bieber, teen paranormal super-agent, can stop her."
FEAR-O-METER: 3

A headshot, you say? Where?

"It's not just about killing, mom: It's about scoring points."

The zappy leash promises to be fun.

Enemies include rampant plant life.


"Send your foes flying" has never been more literal.

Force of Nature

Stranded on a planet with hostile plants, gangs and your former employer—this is **BULLETSTORM** *by Jon Blyth*

Given the macho track record of the developers involved, it's not surprising that this collaborative effort is called what it is. What could be more explosive than a primal force of nature made out of bullets?

What Epic (of *Gears of War* fame) and Polish devs People Can Fly (fathers of old-school FPS *Painkiller*; our favorite game that features a gun that shoots stakes) are creating together is an exciting, excessive turbo-twist on the action shooter, with more emphasis on brutal melee and imaginative weaponry than just bullets.

Bulletstorm has the ridiculously entertaining weapons that you'd expect of the *Painkiller* devs. The Peacemaker Carbine is a standard enough rifle, but an upgrade lets you fire one hundred bullets *at once*. That force will obliterate any common enemies in your path and won't leave a trace of them behind. Other than these fantastic firearms, *Bulletstorm* prides itself on three basic functions that seem standard on the surface, but in practice are very over-the-top: kicks, slides, and an energy leash.

Kicking is simple enough, but it's not just a melee attack. The exaggerated knockback effect from a leg-punch sends your victim flying backward in slow motion. This allows you to pull off an easier headshot, and it's one route into the bank of prestige kills that will give you the points you need to unlock cool s*%#. Headshots are only the most basic option—the world is self-conscious and pregnant with methods to dispatch the gangs.

You've got a leash—an electric rope that can be used to drag enemies into melee range. This creates the amusing possibility of lassoing someone in simply to kick them away again. You then have the option to leash them in again, if you're feeling pointlessly sadistic. This is all part of the plan.

"We want this to be a game where just killing the enemy can be a disappointment," says People Can Fly's Adrian Chmielarz. So, a regular kill will net you just ten points. Fifty-plus points will be gathered from a headshot, bringing a building down on someone or wrapping two grenades attached to a chain around an enemy and kicking him into a crowd of his allies. The idea, Chmielarz explains, is that when you see a crowd of enemies, you don't think: "f***." You think: "*f*** yeah*!"

When you see a crowd of enemies, you don't think: "f*." You think: "*f*** yeah*!"**

Point taken

Bulletstorm has a deliberately comic book–like, pulpy feel about it. It's the 26th century, and Grayson Hunt is the gruff-voiced lead character, an elite assassin in the Dead Echo squad. It's his job to take out terrorists and rebels all over the universe. In the prologue, we land on the roof of a skyscraper and discover that our target isn't who we've been told he is. Plagued by morality, Hunt disobeys the orders of his corrupt boss, General Sarrano. Sarrano—the psychotic and charismatic leader of the Confederation—wastes no time condemning Hunt as a traitor, forcing him into a life of space piracy.

Ten years later, as the game begins, their journey through the ass-end of the universe is made more interesting when Hunt's ship stumbles across the Ulysses, the warbird of General Sarrano. Making a typically drunken judgment, Hunt decides to use the Spectre—his tiny frigate—to take on the General's warship. An unlikely stroke of short-term good luck sees our heroes lodge themselves in the engines of the larger ship. The result: both ships are disabled, and crash-land on the nearby planet, Stygia.

The world that awaits them is a desolate cross between Rapture and *Avatar*'s Pandora; a resort planet in which the beautiful architecture is unoccupied, the plant life is aggressive beyond the calls of evolution, and any of the tourists who stayed behind are mad, feral and dangerous.

Who's that girl?

At the end of our demo, I got to see a boss battle: A giant plant that swallowed one of my comrades earlier pokes its head out of the ground. Kicking has no effect on a creature this size, so the game reverts to a retro-feeling, three-stage boss fight (e.g.: there's a glowing weak spot on the creature's neck). But it doesn't make it any less visually impressive, or dumbly engaging, as the plant exposes its true bulk by hoisting itself out of the ground and eventually starts swinging from the canopy of vines like a photosynthesis-fueled gibbon.

This boss battle is one of the least imagination-stretching moments of the game, but you're still left with the impression that People Can Fly and Epic are the right group to be making this game. *Bulletstorm* is so earnest and sincere in its testosterone-fueled game design that you just can't begrudge it its swagger. ■

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER People Can Fly/ Epic Games
RELEASE 2011
LINK twitter.com/ bulletstorm

KILLING WITH CLASS High-scoring hits

HEADSHOT STREAK 100 POINTS
Three consecutive headshots nets you the least spectacular reward.

4TH OF JULY 100 POINTS
A combo of flame bolas can sever limbs. Chain three of them, and you'll earn a Tom Cruise–themed award.

TRAP SHOOTER 100 POINTS
Get three people in the air with your incinerator, and kill them all at once for a 100-point combo bonus.

MERCY 100 POINTS
Shoot someone in the balls, and as they scream in pain, shoot them in the head. Pretty humane, all things considered.

ENVIRONMENTAL 50 points
A disappointingly generic name for toppling a building onto a bad guy.

GANG BANG 50 POINTS
Incapacitate an enemy with a flame round, and kick him into his friends.

TOXIC LOVE 50 POINTS
Flower attack! Use the poisonous gases of a plant to kill your enemy.

BAD TOUCH 50 POINTS
Kick someone into the spines of a cactus. Cliff Bleszinski thought this one up.

The Real Liberty City

APB is a multiplayer, customizable game of cops and robbers ***by Craig Pearson***

A burning car drives past on two wheels. A tattooed, nipple-ring-wearing thug leans out of the window, firing back at a wailing police car. It's strange to think that this is happening because Realtime Worlds' creative director Dave Jones got pissed off at *Dark Age of Camelot*.

When MMO servers die, they merge players from one server into another. Jones thinks that's bad, and that it changes the game for too many people. He was once in a *DAoC* server that merged English and French speakers, creating a language barrier that soured the experience. He had a vision of an MMO that didn't need large server populations to survive, that would allow people to play the way they wanted without impacting players who were hoping for a different environment.

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER Realtime Worlds
RELEASE Summer
LINK APB.com

But the server technology Jones envisioned wouldn't really work for medieval fantasy, and he had already worked on *Grand Theft Auto* and *Crackdown*. *APB* was *always* going to about getting in cars and tearing #&$! up.

For an action game, *APB* is new and exciting, like an instant, car-skiddy version of *EVE Online*.

You can be a Criminal or an Enforcer in the city of San Paro. One hundred players are drawn from a server population of 100,000 to fill a district and go at it. (There are plenty of options to select where you fight—you can let the game choose, follow friends or bring up a server browser.) Missions are selected by the Crims, and the Enforcer faction simply tries to stop the bad guys from carrying them out.

When I got to playtest *APB* recently at Realtime Worlds' HQ, my team of four Q&A testers and I were given a mission to tag the city with spray paint. I jumped in a jacked car with one of them and zipped off. This wasn't a idle joyride: In the opposite lane, another van of Criminals got rammed by pursuing Enforcers, both teams fighting out their own mission that I couldn't take part in. To pass the time, I leaned out of the window and sprayed my 9mm at pedestrians.

At the tag spot I hit "F" and my character started spraying the wall; the rest of the team took up positions on each side of the alley when the Enforcers started pouring in. It was a smaller team than ours, which meant the game's matchmaking software thought they were better players. My level one Criminal probably brought our team's rating down.

Using *APB*'s very functional voice chat, we talked about tactics. "Shoot the punks and run to the next waypoint" seemed the most obvious route—we blasted away with our machine guns, moving down the alley, and it occurred to me how little I like *APB*'s combat.

There's no location-based damage for players, which leaves the game feeling unsophisticated when headshot instincts take hold and produce no obvious benefit against Enforcers or cars. When I died, I also respawned far from the action, so I had to make my own way back, hijacking a van to get there faster.

That octopus T-shirt is the player's own design.

A living, breathing city of terrified pedestrians.

APB is big on celebrity. Realtime Worlds wants players to become notorious Criminals or respected Enforcers. Their character customization tools are a massive palette for creating astonishingly diverse player models. The 100,000-capacity server tracks players on daily, weekly and monthly leaderboards at every level. Wherever you are, you'll know who the best players are. Which is how I knew that the game had sent an Enforcer who had been owning teams all over the server after our gang. Uh-oh.

That's what *APB* does best. It dynamically judges what you're doing and throws a giant, highly customized, improbably mohawked nemesis into the works, possibly named "Ihaveactuallybeeninjail2009."

My team headed for the next marker and I followed, keeping an eye out for the telltale red HUD markers of the enemy. In the end, when the Enforcers caught up with my guys I was able to hit them from behind. I drove my van into one and jumped out, again instinctively firing at an Enforcer's head. He killed me easily.

However frustrating, the game's missing headshots could end up driving the game forward. Changing the rules of a 100-player instance is nothing to Realtime Worlds: They already have an alternative "Chaos" ruleset running on a few beta servers, which lifts the ban on players shooting those who aren't part of their own mission. It's possible, and likely, that the main game will remain location-based damage-free, while a small group of servers will have this switched on.

The MMO side of things produces very interesting results. In the 25,000-strong beta, the Enforcers are on a mission to arrest every Criminal in the game, detailing their captures in screenshots. There's also the San Paro PD, a group of Enforcers roleplaying the game to the letter of the law. They look like cops, patrol, stop at red lights and have developed their own radio codes.

For an action game, *APB* is new and exciting, like an instant, car-skiddy version of *EVE Online*. The potential for user creativity is even more promising than ramming a car full of Enforcers down an alleyway in a stolen truck. ■

The world needs more action-driven MMOs.

You can call in backup to escalate battles...

...which end up looking like this.

That man's spent a lot of time on that face.

Need to know

What is it?
A third-person action espionage game

Influenced by
Metal Gear Solid

Play it on
3GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory (89%)

Copy protection
Requires constant internet connection

***Splinter Cell: Conviction* is a superb third-person action game and a great series reboot.**

SMASHING

SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION is a brilliant, modern re-imagining of stealth gaming ***by Craig Pearson***

Conviction is *Splinter Cell* for everyone. It's the game that finally unleashes Sam Fisher as a justice-dealing, jaw-shattering, defenestrating ball of rage. Guards, doors, windows, lights and office equipment are all targets as he battles through a conspiracy that's devastated his family and could bring down the U.S. government.

It's a superb third-person action espionage game and a great series reboot. So many demands were put on the player in the previous games that soured the experience: don't kill everybody, don't get spotted—not to mention the by-design inaccuracies in the weaponry that forced you to play stealthily. I enjoyed those limitations, but looking at it dispassionately, a game about a super-lethal, cold-blooded spy should empower the player. You should be the most dangerous man drawing breath. Sam's never been all that deadly. Until now.

Sam has been jettisoned by the government agency he'd devoted his life to, and discovered that the death of his daughter in a previous game was a setup. She's still alive, he's looking for the people that took her, and there's the added bonus of a threat to the President by the people involved. It all ties together, and it flicks the switches that change Sam from a man working under directives to a man whose heart rate wouldn't rise one beat if he ate a baby in front of its mother.

By poking Sam with a stick and singing off key, Ubisoft has given him a sense of purpose. He's a joy to control—swift, even when being stealthy, and utterly lethal when you need him to be, such as in the ridiculous spy moments where you're hanging upside down from a pipe over a glass ceiling. Below you, three heavily-armed guards protect the computer you need to hack. You should neither be confident in this situation nor should you relish it. But Sam moves so fast you expect his limbs to whipcrack: I dropped through the skylight, landed on one guard and killed him with a stomp to the head. I snapped left to one guard and headshot him, then spun to the remaining one and unloaded the rest of the clip in his direction. He dropped. In all, it took about half a second. *Splinter Cell* is now cool.

Sam is a joy to control: swift even when being stealthy, and utterly lethal.

Fisher's movement has been tweaked to sharpen up everything. If you push Sam up against a wall, the game will highlight the next bit of cover to use. Tapping the spacebar will send him sprinting over there before he dives, sliding into concealment like a man hiding from, well, a vicious mercenary army. He'll leap over tables, dive out of windows, barge through doors, leap up to pipes. He's a man obsessed with causing havoc, and he uses the ensuing panic to cover his actions. New gadgets enable you to disrupt lighting, attract guards and blow up stuff.

Top marks

The developers have done a great job of giving you the benefit of Sam's experience. At its simplest, if you hammer the fire button while holding the pistol, it'll unload the bullets as quickly as you can, which was never possible in *Splinter Cell* before. But Mark and Execute is the smartest addition. It rewards you for stealth hand-to-hand kills by enabling you to select targets for instant death. That glass ceiling scenario could easily be resolved by marking the three guards and hitting the execute button, triggering a cool series of pinpoint headshots, snapping between the selected guards before they could react. In game time, it's all over in a fraction of a second. It's exactly what Sam Fisher should be capable of.

Fisher is actually overpowered. Even though I died a good few times, it was mostly from a need to experiment with his skills and the layout of the levels. In one upstairs laboratory, I peeked under a door

Reward yourself

Co-op achievements not in the game

Open+wound
Manage to break down a door when your buddy is hiding behind it.

Light fancrashtic
Shoot a giant chandelier down when your partner is beneath it.

Pow! Haha
Shoot a guard your buddy has been laboriously tracking for ages.

Thomas Crown Unfair
Jump down from above and land on your partner's head.

©istockphoto.com, boris64, beakraus, 4x6

Steeple your fingers and giggle as you consider your next move.

and spotted a couple of argumentative scientists getting executed. Vengeance! I broke down the door and barged into the office, ran past the five guards there, dove through a shut window on the other side of the office and started shimmying along outside, clinging to handholds. Guards poked their heads out of windows, probably wondering why a crazy man just destroyed a perfectly good door and bolted past them to leap out a five-story window. I moved from one to the next, reaching up and pulling them out and to their deaths. If I hadn't accidentally leapt up and performed a melee kill, exposing my back, I'd have defenestrated them all.

This escape also allowed me to make good use of the other new skill: Last Known Position. If you're spotted (and you will be), an outline of Fisher appears like a hologram. This is where the guards will focus their attack. Combined with Sam's new freedom of movement, it's a lethal tool. The most satisfying kills are always the ones you help along, guiding a guard to expose his back to you. From there, you're in charge. Steeple your fingers and giggle while you consider your next move... because a guard's back is a glorious thing to consider. (Not in *that* way.)

A headshot is traditional, but a bit of waste if you have the time. If you get close enough, there's a number of brutal melee death animations—neck snaps, arm twists, gun butts—a gruesome reward. The executions are speedy and efficient, and as violent as anything in Rockstar's brutal *Manhunt*.

The third option is to grab the guard and use him as a human shield: it has the added bonus of enabling you to toss the guard. I tossed them off buildings, out of windows and even at other guards. You know what? It was worth it, if just for the double entendre.

Double act

All this fun is effectively doubled in the co-op mode. *Conviction* has a prequel campaign for two players. This mismatching of spies from either side of the Russian/American divide provides both audience and accomplice for the bizarre stuff you pull off. It plays as an extension of the single-player, with all the same moves and skills available to you.

It's phenomenally fun. Asking your compadre to shoot out the lights while you stalk a guard, popping headshots at the same time and watching the marked guards wink out of existence on your HUD, is a uniquely brilliant thing.

The tension carries over well from the main game. Co-op is a much stealthier undertaking, but with twice the potential for accidental detection. Plans are often improvised out of violent, panicked necessity. "Oh crap, oh crap crap crap crap," is the co-op mantra. Undoing your friend's screwup—when he drops a chandelier that misses every guard while simultaneously giving away his position—is hilarious.

A few co-op-specific elements have been introduced in this part of the game. If you "die," you can lie there playing dead (until a counter hits zero and you're actually dead), waiting for your partner to revive you. Or you can sit up and take pot shots at the

Weapon of choice

Why I only used the pistol for the entire game

1 **It's silenced**
A big bonus versus the shotgun, which has a noisy bang that alerts guards.

2 **Accuracy**
You can headshot someone across the room from cover.

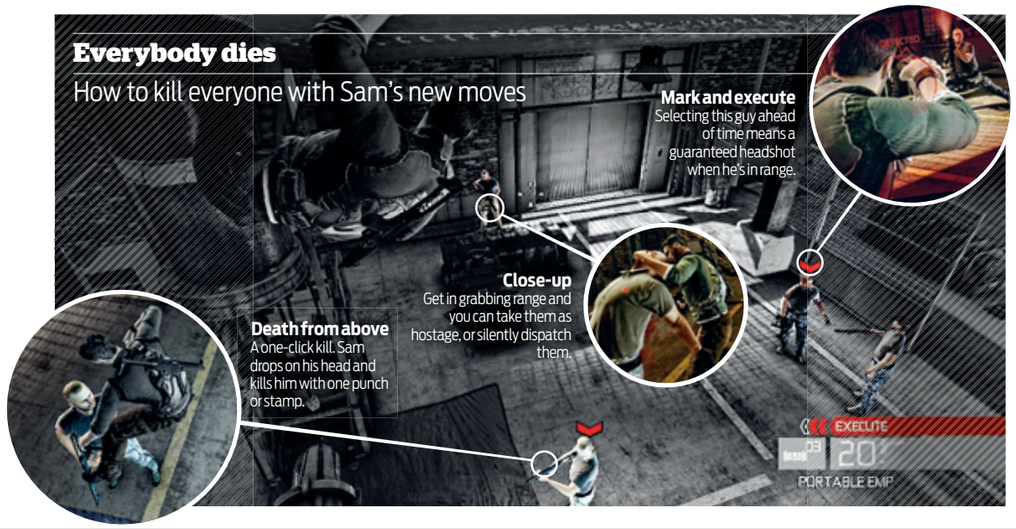
3 **It's quick**
If you miss a shot, a few swift finger clicks will finish the job.

4 **It's cheap**
Upgrades cost money. It's cheaper to upgrade the pistol than a rifle.

5 **Cool factor**
I'm a spy. I just killed a room of people with a gun that went "pft."

Everybody dies

How to kill everyone with Sam's new moves



Cooperative torture. Hurt people with friends!

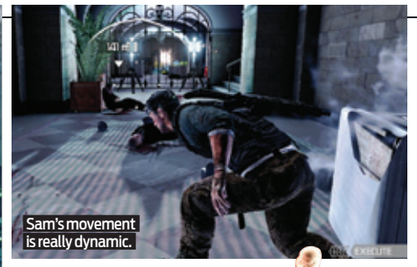
"Hey, stop that! Don't make me come down there!"

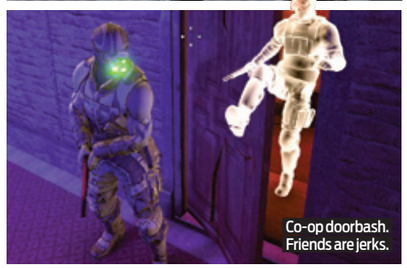
Death by defenstration.

Three down. Sam's vicious now.

Guards can be used as human shields.

Sometimes you just have to go in shooting.


Sam's movement is really dynamic.


Co-op doorbash. Friends are jerks.

Sam is reduced to swiping stuff from vans.

Sam's soul makes a break for it.

Daylight missions are not good for stealth.

"Kiss my elbow. Kiissss itttt!"

enemy, but they'll return fire and kill you properly this time. You can even be grappled by one of the enemy, in which case your only hope is for your partner to sort it out. I got cocky in a security room once, and had a melee attack turn into precisely one of those sticky situations.

"Don't worry," I was nonchalantly reassured by the same partner who'd managed to botch a simple room entrance, alerting every guard in the area, which was the very reason I was in this predicament in the first place. He climbed out of a window, using the ledges to get behind the guard and me. He reached up through the window, grabbed the guard and yanked him off of me, dropping him to his death down below.

Evil twin

That just doesn't happen in other games. And it's not a unique example. I've leapt over barriers, killing a guard just as he was about to kill my partner; I've thrown a man through a window and watched him sail out of it on the other player's screen; I've run up to a prone agent as the life was draining out of him, firing wildly with his pistol to keep his enemies back as I slammed a defib paddle on his chest, while watching a guard collapse to my left as my partner popped a bullet in his brain in the nick of time.

Both the co-op and single-player games are part of a silly story well told. It's a tour of some amazing places—the Lincoln Memorial, secret government agency Third Echelon, The White House—while Sam unravels who's doing what to him and why. I'm good at missing plot points in games, but with 12-foot-high letters plastering the story over every flat surface (occasionally with video), it was hard not to take it in.

When important information is needed, it's up to you to beat it out of someone. You tend to remember what's being said when you've just forced the person to tell you by mashing their head into a bank of monitors. You also tend to remember when things don't work so well. You have no control over saving your position at all, instead relying on a checkpoint system that's sometimes spot-on, and other times returns you to redo huge sections because of an unfortunate insta-death. Guards are the usual mixture of smart, tenacious and blind.

And even with the Deniable Ops mode, which allows you configure single-player and co-op battles to your liking, *Conviction* feels short. There are at least two mini-levels—one in Iraq and a chase sequence—that are really out of place.

Stealth fans might be concerned that *Conviction* is too actiony. There are a few sections where you're unable avoid a head-on battle, but the metric I use is, "Did I kill more lights than people?" Yes, yes I did. It's not possible to take everyone on without planning from the dark, considering options and scoping out the levels. You can try, but when things go wrong, you'll realize that stealth doesn't mean just hiding and avoiding people. You really do need to know the lay of the land.

Obligatory warning

None of that matters if you can't play the game. A day and a half have passed since I was last able to log into *Splinter Cell: Conviction* and play it. Ubisoft's DRM system will not allow you to play this game if you're not connected to the internet; if your connection drops out, even in single-player, the game pauses and waits for it to re-establish. Right now, thanks to an organized hack-attack on Ubisoft's servers, I can't even start the game. I'm heartbroken. Ubisoft has finally made a *Splinter Cell* game which, as a fan of the series, I'm happy to recommend to everybody, only to saddle it with the sort of digital sabotage they send Fisher to undo.

If you want the support of PC gamers—and *Splinter Cell* is a PC game—you can't treat your users like this. You can't expect them to pay for a service that you can't guarantee will work from one hour to the next. It doesn't matter that it's an attack. It could just as easily be the result of a sketchy ISP, a glitchy router, or any other vagaries of the great internet. Who's going to buy a game that they know might not work?

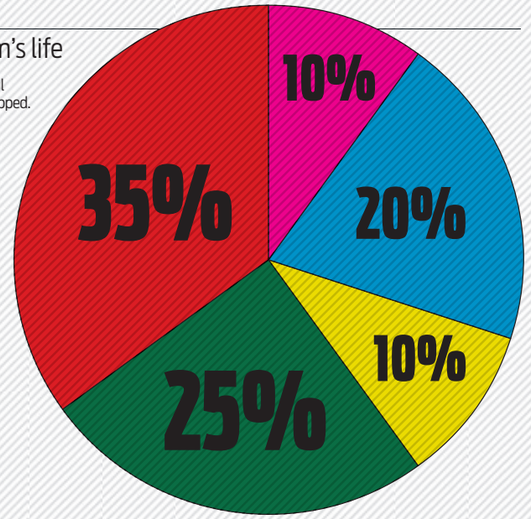
It's unbelievably frustrating. If you can ignore the DRM, this really is a great game. If not? Then far less so. ■

The guards are the usual mix of smart, tenacious and blind.

Pie-chart of pain

Charting the hurt in Sam's life

After years of taking crap and having awful things happen to him, Sam Fisher has snapped. Here's a breakdown of his breakdown, in bright cheery colors.



- **Wife's death** — Pre-game, cancer
- **Brother's Death** — Murdered. Novel: *Splinter Cell: Fallout*
- **Abandoned by Third Echelon** — Game: *Splinter Cell: Conviction*
- **Friend Irving Lambert's death** — By Sam, protecting his cover. Game: *Splinter Cell: Essentials* (PSP)
- **Daughter's kidnapping /death/faking death** — Novel: *Splinter Cell*, game: *SC: Double Agent*, game: *SC: Conviction*

◆ **Price** $60 ◆ **Release** April 30 ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** two player, co-op and versus ◆ **Link** splintercell.com ◆ **ESRB** M

VERDICT

Excellent espionage, with superb cooperative play. But we can't recommend that you buy this game with the current DRM.

PC GAMER 87

PRECIOUS METAL

Coonskin caps, revolvers and gold-filled sacks: **LEAD AND GOLD: GANGS OF THE WILD WEST** is simple, satisfying shooting ***by Evan Lahti***

Need to know

What is it?
A western-themed, five-on-five third-person shooter

Influenced by
Gears of War, Team Fortress 2

Play it on
2.4GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/ Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Battlefield Heroes (74%)

Copy protection
Must be logged in (Steam or other service) to play

I have a brilliant financial plan: Games should be cost-adjusted to what they would've cost during the time they're set in. You're making a depression-era mafia epic? Price it at $2. Creating a caveman-themed, rocks-and-clubs beat-'em-up? That'll be four boars. *Star Wars* RPG? 3,200 credits.

Lead and Gold is worth its weight in any currency. It looks and plays better than what I've come to expect from a $15 game; ask it to stand in the street with only its polish, lighting effects, gunplay and level design to defend itself, and it'd leave any other game in the third-person, team-based genre full of smoking holes.

That's a terrific achievement—the looming goldrush of budget-priced shooters (looking to cash in on the success that *Battlefield 1943* had on consoles) has a lot to learn from *Lead*. Its stripped-down feature set —five modes, five maps—makes it remarkably lightweight and the perfect shot in the arm to your action library, if you have room for a game that's easy to pick up and put down.

Cowboys vs. cowboys

You play as one of four old western archetypes: Trapper (a sniper), Blaster (a shotgunner), Deputy (a medium-range rifler) or Gunslinger (a pistoleer), all of whom are easy to learn and play. I love how well-animated these desperados are—I jab the space bar to leap over a ravine, then see the animation transition into a very *Gears of War*-like duck-roll as I hit the ground. Three enemies have gathered around a capture point, standing near it to lower my team's flag and raise their own. I need to scatter them off the objective, so I use my Blaster's special ability—hitting Alt to light a dynamite stick—and underhand it at them. Blam! Those that didn't escape in time are blown clear off the platform.

Alongside loose gunplay moments like these, most of the excitement comes from *Lead*'s two unique attack- and-defend modes: Powderkeg and Robbery. In each, there's a heavy object that the attacking team needs to carry: a bag of gold or an explosive barrel to destroy landmarks with. Robbery feels like gold rush rugby; relaying a giant pouch of precious metal like a football as you quick-roll through dust to dodge 19th century buckshot is a great feeling. Powderkeg lets you be a bastard as enemies try to carry large barrel-bombs into your base; try sniping the keg while it's still in the hands of the player carrying it.

The "gangs" in *Lead*'s subtitle loosely refers to its teamwork-encouraging "synergy" system. Each character class has a passive trait that buffs teammates if they're within a spit's distance of one another, which provides an easily understood incentive for sticking with your compadres. Run and gun near a Trapper, *Lead*'s raccoon-capped sniper girl, and you'll have a higher chance of dealing critical hits; hang with a Blaster, and you'll have a bit better damage resistance. It's a good idea, but *Lead*'s implementation lacks potency—I rarely noticed any sort of boost from staying near my team.

Lead's one significant disappointment is its lack of dedicated servers for multiplayer. If the preselected host among your session's up-to-10 players quits, the entire game is lost. A few other loose ends, like not being able to monitor your ping once you've joined a game, annoy a little, but *Lead*'s best asset is that it's better than its cost. Let it be a side dish to your other shooter experiences, and it'll be worth the sliver of gold it costs. ■

Missed opportunity: Voice-overs could've granted the classes a dash of personality and humor.

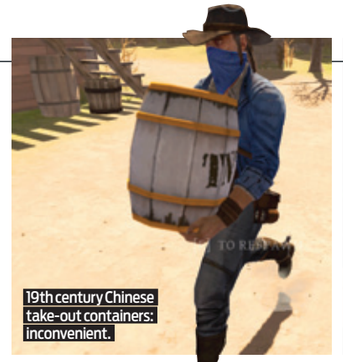
Relaying a giant pouch of precious metal like a football as you quick-roll through the dust is a great feeling.

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paradox ◆ **Developer** Fatshark ◆ **Multiplayer** 10 players
◆ **Link** paradoxplaza.com/games/lead-and-gold ◆ **ESRB** M

VERDICT

Lead's polish makes it easy to compare against titles twice its price. It lacks depth, but its core gunplay and design are airtight.

PC GAMER **83**


19th century Chinese take-out containers: inconvenient.

Kafloom! That's how explosions sounded back then.

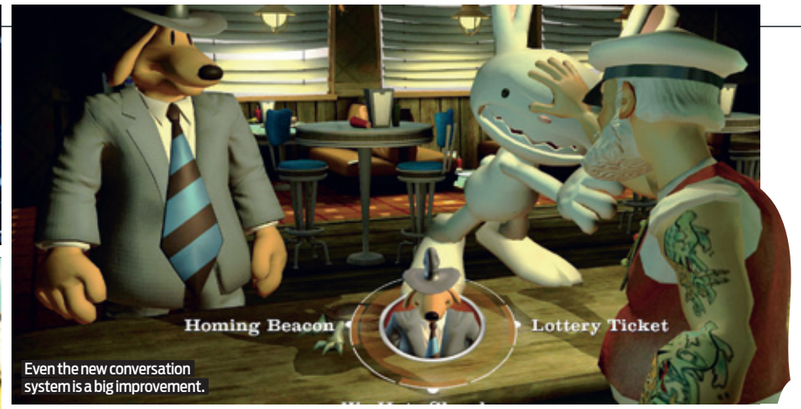
L&G's long-ranged minx, the Trapper.

Lead is full of of wooden plank ramps, roofs and rock ledges that form elevation that's fun to traverse.

The skull/flag on the Blaster's back isn't a cute backpack—he's carrying his team's mobile respawn point.

Still not as funny as The Man With Two Brains.

Just your regular giant gorilla spaceship.



Even the new conversation system is a big improvement.

Yet another evil space gorilla trying to destroy the world.

It's good to know Max has ear bones.

PSYDEKICKS

SAM & MAX return with **THE DEVIL'S PLAYOUSE: THE PENAL ZONE**...and they're psychic ***by John Walker***

Need to know

What is it?
Episodic point-and-click adventure.

Influenced by
LucasArts' back catalog

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 7800GT/Radeon X800

Alternatively
Monkey Island Special Edition

Copy protection
Activation code

Things are very peculiar at the beginning of this third season of dog and rabbit freelance police escapades. The story begins smack-bang in the middle of a bemusing plot, where you're held captive by a space gorilla. Your rabbit buddy Max is now a playable character with psychic powers. It seems things aren't happening in order. Thankfully, there's a Rod Serling-esque narrator to guide us through this muddle. More thankfully, it's really funny.

A lot has changed since the previous season: new controls, new ways to play, a more interesting approach to puzzles and, crucially, a less formulaic approach to narrative.

The inventory is much more interesting, adding a level of detail that was absent from the previous episodes. Gone is the spilled box along the bottom of the screen, replaced by the full-screen cardboard container from 1993's classic *Hit the Road*. These objects are now interactive in more interesting ways, and can be looked at, picked up or activated. It makes things feel much more involved.

Losing control

Frustratingly, Sam is now controlled by holding down the left mouse button and dragging it in the direction you wish to head, the right mouse button for running. We didn't want this in the *Monkey Island* episodes and we don't want it here. He'll often move in literally the opposite direction. There are keyboard controls, too, but these are almost as haphazard.

A far more positive change is Max's powers. Gathered as you progress, Max gains new abilities when you choose to play as the rabbit. Perspective swoops into first person, and you can use powers such as teleportation, possession and transmogrification to solve puzzles. This new dynamic has liberated the design, advancing the series from dull collect-and-use inventory challenges to mind-twisting teasers. Using psychic visions to learn the correct approach to a situation is great fun, and figuring out how to teleport characters into locations at the right moment proves very rewarding.

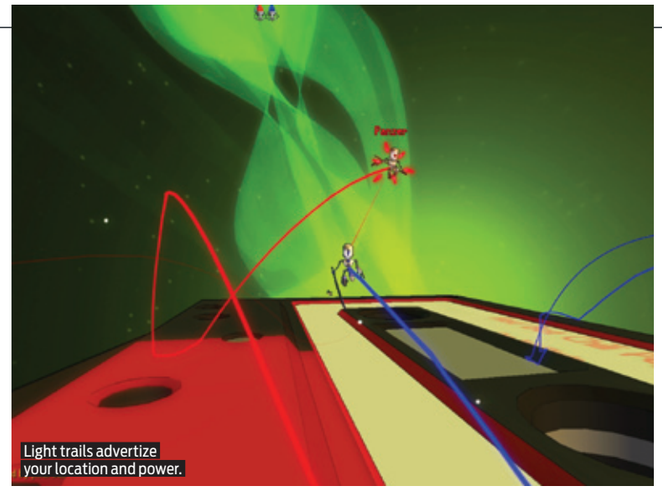
Even funnier than the duo's sarcastic remarks are the situations themselves. Using psychic powers to prevent an evil space gorilla from taking over the universe with magic toys proves to be an excellent source of material. It's strange that no one thought of it before. And no opportunity is missed for making a smutty joke, with regards to the word "penal." "Skun-ka'pe gets sucked right in the penal zone...so to speak," says Max, inevitably. ■

VERDICT

An incredibly refreshing reinvention of the *S&M* games—much funnier and far, far more interesting to play. Thank goodness.

PC GAMER **82**

◆ **Price** $35 for all five episodes ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Telltale ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** telltalegames.com/samandmax ◆ **ESRB** E

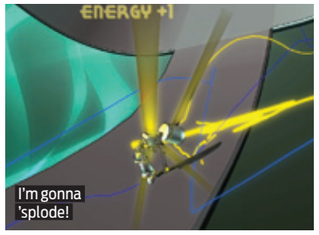

Light trails advertize your location and power.

BLAZE OF GLORY

Jet-powered, suicidal robo-ninjas battle against each other in outer-space combat in **PLAIN SIGHT** ***by Erik Belsaas***

The multiplayer-only action in *Plain Sight* is fast—absurdly fast. Your jumpy little sword-swinging robot hardly even touches the ground between flying leaps through space, charging forward with attacks that send you crashing into opponents in midair, and then falling toward whatever piece of floating terrain is closest. "Up" is a relative term here.

The idea is to catch an opponent off guard and dice them before they dice you. Your reward is their energy, which makes you physically bigger, faster and all-around better. However, the bigger you are, the more you're worth dead, which makes for a fun and frantic hit-and-run mentality. Killing alone doesn't get you points, though; in order to take your score to the bank, you have to choose to kill yourself by overloading your bot. Timed perfectly, your detonation satisfyingly blasts to bits anyone trying to take advantage of your momentary immobility by getting close. Points aren't just for winning, either—they also give you essential points to spend on upgrades for the rest of the round, like a shield, faster attacks or improved jumping power.



I'm gonna 'splode!

Battle is a thrill, but *Plain Sight* is short on customization options. I wanted to tweak my robot's appearance and make him my own, but every player's robot rolls off the assembly line looking identical. Also, you have to log into the slightly unstable game servers even to play against AI bots, and the camera can get sickeningly confused while jumping around the more complicated levels. Still, *Plain Sight* is certainly one of the best times you can have blowing yourself up. ■

PC GAMER **81**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Beatnik Games ◆ **Developer** Beatnik Games
◆ **Multiplayer** 20 players ◆ **Link** plainsightgame.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

Riding *inside* the boat is for sissies.

TACKTICAL

Learning the ropes in **SAIL SIMULATOR 2010** involves a lot of ropes

Sailing is actually a damn technical business, as *Sail Simulator 2010* testifies. It models every sheet (sail) and lanyard (rope). Racing or cruising, you're constantly tightening and loosening, reefing and hoisting, in an effort to harness every ounce of motive power from the wind. It's a refreshingly hands-on experience.

Although there are no tutorials explaining how to set sails and make use of boat features like canting keels, daggerboards and poop cleavers (yes, I made up one of those), a lot can be learned from watching the AI in action. Individual parts of the procedure may be handed over to the CPU at any time, meaning you can control as much or as little as you want.

The scenery could've been more impressive, though. Developer Stentec has done a great job on the wet, wavy stuff, but the solid parts are sparsely dressed. Of the four scenic areas only Scheveningen, a nine-mile stretch of Netherlands coast, received much shore detail.

It's a similar situation with watercraft. The simulator ships with six types, ranging from the darty little Laser to the seven-man Open 70. If you want a catamaran, though, you'll have to invest in an upcoming add-on.

To experience the exhilaration of competition, you've got to join the throng of sailors that gather every night on the Stentec server. Scraping buoys, jostling for good lines and desperately trying to avoid wind shadows, *Sail Simulator 2010* is at its convincing best. A simple online ranking system uses individual performances to build an international league table—readers who like their sims salt-stained and subtle might want to help lift the United States out of fourth place. ■

Tim Stone

PC GAMER **75**

◆ **Price** $54 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** sailsimulator.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

INFATUATION

This liberating settlement simulation may act aloof, but it's **LOVE** at first sight for explorers and collaborators ***by Josh Augustine***

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Need to know

What is it?
A first-person, open-world, online settlement simulator

Influenced by
Spore, *ARMA II*, early human civilizations

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GTX/ Radeon HD 5670

Alternatively
Spore (91%)

Copy protection
Subscription

It's been said that true love is about the journey, not the destination. If that's so, *Love* lives up to its namesake and then some. You won't immediately understand this wonderful shooter-adventure-exploration MMO and you may never fully unlock its potential, but step by step, you'll come to appreciate all of its intricacies.

Within seconds of starting up the 41MB client, I was surrounded by *Love*'s gorgeous game world. No character creation, no class choices—you're simply dropped into a world that's begging to be explored.

Picture perfect

At a big-picture level, *Love* is pretty simple to grasp: you and your fellow players (up to 400 at a time, although I saw closer to four or five at a time) attempt to create a settlement on a planet inhabited by hostile NPC settlements. Collecting tokens around the world and bringing them back to your settlement unlocks new tools for everyone. Tools start off simple—a blaster weapon and a tool to raise and lower terrain—and become increasingly complex. Weapons range all the way up to artillery, and the config tool lets you edit the settings of any interactable object in the world, such as sign posts, teleporters and power lines.

The complete lack of tutorial or comprehensive instructions would be painful in most games, but I was never frustrated with *Love*'s insistence that I discover the gameplay myself. The lack of death penalty, extremely quick movement speed and beautiful aesthetics all propelled me to explore the world recklessly, allowing my imagination to guide me more than a sense of purpose or direction. When I encountered a cliff, I intuitively used the terrain tool to create a path to the top, where I discovered an NPC settlement with dazzling statues, a functional zipline system and energy beams shooting all over. I stood there for some time to simply watch the sky and fog move through lights, feeling like I was in a Van Gogh painting.

That said, there really needs to be a comprehensive tutorial for the interface and basic game mechanics, at the very least, because *Love*'s UI has a lot of convenient tricks to help you interact with the world, once you figure out how to use them. For example, I spent the first two days tracking coordinates of points of interest in a spreadsheet before I discovered I could store them in the game's toolbar with one click.

Collaborating with players to establish, design and defend a settlement and watching it evolve from a stone in a pit to a forcefield-protected fortress is incredible, but it can feel disheartening to return to a basic settlement every day thanks to NPCs continuing to attack when no players are online to defend it.

Birds and bees

While stealing an NPC camp's token and zip-lining across a chasm to escape the angry pack of soldiers chasing you feels incredible—memorable, unscripted moments like this emerge naturally—what I enjoy most about *Love* is that I never find myself number-crunching gear or talents; instead I'm always imagining what else I can do, what treasures of aesthetics await me around the next corner. I don't know who my character is or why he's here, but this game isn't about my character. It's about the world and working with the other players to uncover new ways of molding it to our will.

Most players should have a working understanding of the game in just a few days and be able to get an absurd amount of enjoyment out of their first 30 days. I doubt many will play the game consistently at a $10/month price tag, but there aren't many better ways to spend those first 10 bucks. ■

Crossing an Uncrossable Chasm

Love has some unique methods of transportation, but you'll need the right tools to take advantage of them.

Use your **binoculars** to scan the target ledge for a cable relay. Click on it to log its coordinates.

Find a nearby cable relay that's accessible using the **terrain editor** to raise or lower yourself.

Hack the cable relay with the **config tool** and input the stored coordinates to create a zip line between them. Enjoy the ride!

VERDICT

Love's inspired combo of base-building, shooting and collaboration makes this gorgeous world a delightful playground.

PC GAMER **86**

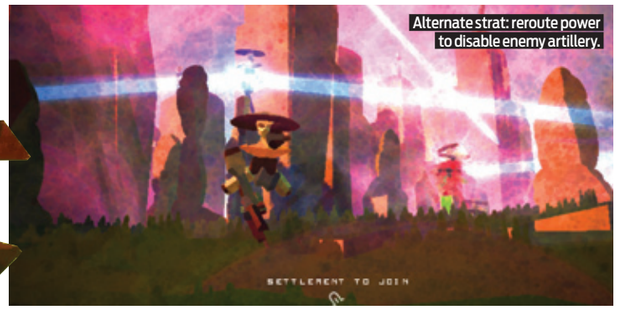
◆ **Price** Free to download, $10/month subscription ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Eskel Steenberg ◆ **Developer** Eskel Steenberg ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** quelsolaar.com ◆ **ESRB** N/A

The center of the civilized world: Player-made settlements can become quite complex.

Water is strictly off-limits without the diving tool .

You don't get to craft your own avatar, but the game creates a crazy-looking one for you.

Love's impressionist art style makes more sense in motion, but take my word for it: that's a hostile NPC coming to throw you in jail.



Alternate strat: reroute power to disable enemy artillery.

Alluring landscapes inspire a powerful wanderlust.

In *Sleep is Death* you create your own stories.

And that's why Larry stopped drinking.

STORYTIME

Letting strangers and friends tell stories together, **SLEEP IS DEATH** has infinite potential *by Graham Smith*

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Need to know

What is it?
A two-player, improvisational storytelling kit

Influenced by
Masq, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

Play it on
900MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, integrated videocard

Alternatively
The theater

Copy protection
Serial key

Sleep is Death is a two-player, turn-based storytelling kit. One player is the director; he creates a scenario by either using the included resources or making his own tiles, objects, characters, and even music. When ready, he starts a game and invites a second player: the actor. That's when all hell breaks loose.

With each turn, the actor has 30 seconds to use three abilities: move, act and talk. With those, it's possible to do almost anything. In my first game I licked a cactus, decided my daughter was really a 17-year-old dwarf and tried to rob my neighbor. In each instance, the director had his own 30 seconds to type dialogue responses and change the environment accordingly.

So when in the same game I vomited and the director didn't have a sprite for a puddle of sick in his resources, he was able to draw and place it. This is the amazing, near-infinite potential of *Sleep is Death*: I wanted to vomit, and I could.

To cover all these possibilities, the director's tools are more complex than the actor's, including editors that let you change any sprite and music on the fly. It doesn't take long to get comfortable with them, but even when you're experienced, the 30-second turn length feels short.

Two act play

My second game was a detective story, in which my partner and I were investigating a dead body found in the woods. While world control lies with the director, an actor dictates a lot. I played Davis, a neurotic who distanced himself from uncomfortable situations by narrating them out loud, and who had a serious crush on his partner.

There's nothing stopping you telling a serious and heartfelt tale, except for other players. Give a gamer free will, and he will be silly. My second director had decided the killer would be a taxidermist, but he hadn't guessed I'd pretend to be a customer and would need to deliver a dead dog. He quickly created a new scene in which my partner and I went to my house, to my very-much-alive dog. I called him Professor Snufflekins... and then I bludgeoned him to death. Our detective story soon became a dark comedy.

The only limits are imagination and resources. The latter are easily shared, and with enough players a bank of great art and music will follow. As for imagination, if the screenshot flipbooks appearing online are any indication, with their tales of space plagues, platforming Hitlers and murderous Guy-brushes, there's no shortage of that stuff floating around either. ■

VERDICT

A new type of adventure game that turns storytelling into play. *Sleep is Death* has few peers and enormous potential.

PC GAMER 90

◆ **Price** $14 for two copies ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Jason Rohrer ◆ **Developer** Jason Rohrer ◆ **Multiplayer** 2 players ◆ **Link** sleepisdeath.net ◆ **ESRB** NR

You need to skedaddle to solve quests in time, and you'll still fail a lot. Poor Hakonsom lasted less than two minutes.

LIVELY AFFLICTION

Towns are easy come, easy go in the surprising world of **DIN'S CURSE** *by Desslock*

It doesn't shatter the dungeon crawler mold embodied by *Diablo*, but *Din's Curse* does break preconceptions about static environments in action-RPGs. It's a straightforward hack-'n-slash RPG, where you're based in a small town with a handful of taciturn NPCs and descend into a local dungeon for loot and leveling. But unlike typical dungeon crawlers, which allow you to proceed at your own pace, the world of *Din's Curse* is in constant motion.

The dynamic world is definitely *Din's* strongest feature. Each randomly generated town and dungeon can be subject to a wide range of potential conditions, such as being prone to spider infestation or reduced visibility due to fog. You're obliged to complete dungeon expedition tasks for Din, the vengeful deity who has conscripted you to his service, and a few stock vendors. Solve enough local quests and you'll save the town and travel to the next one, which will be burdened by its own random conditions and woes. But time is always of the essence, and failing to complete quests in a timely manner will make tasks harder, as creatures can grow progressively stronger by preying on their neighbors. Unchecked, they can cause you to fail your mission or even destroy whole towns.

There's a rare sense that *anything* can happen, as you're constantly surprised by events. You can smash out support columns to bury foes under walls, monsters can escape the dungeon and invade the town, and once a single zombie wandered into a town and zombified all the NPCs inside. Creatures are well-designed and sufficiently varied in their attacks to require distinct countermeasures, as you'll be hunted by invisible stalkers, be zapped by Liches, and face elemental blobs that split into two smaller offspring when dispatched. In keeping with 30 years of genre tradition for "Roguelikes," there's an optional hardcore mode that makes character death permanent.

It's a low-budget game from a small developer so the graphics aren't flashy. Spell effects are rudimentary and animations sometimes seem lethargic, but *Din's* has enough character that even the art grows on you. Eventually it feels repetitive, but the quantity of character and dungeon permutations is sufficient to engage even jaded genre veterans for weeks. ■

PC GAMER 76

◆ **Price** $25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Soldak ◆ **Developer** Soldak ◆ **Multiplayer** co-op only, theoretically unlimited players ◆ **Link** soldak.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

Kasumi's about to steal my kill.

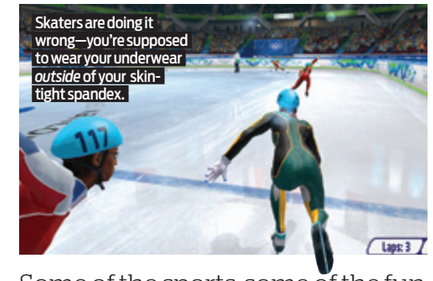
It's easy to forget **MASS EFFECT 2: KASUMI'S STOLEN MEMORY**

To recruit master thief Kasumi, Shepard must help her pull off a heist at the fortified mansion of a ruthless crime lord named Donovan Hock. The fancy parts of Hock's opulant mansion are unlike anywhere else we've visited in *Mass Effect 2*, though as soon as the action starts it devolves into a familiar future-warehouse shootout.

With only a couple of minor decisions to be made and just a short shootout section there's no significant replay value to *KSM*, but you do get a marginally improved SMG, a stealthy, lethal companion and a snazzy new casual outfit to strut around the *Normandy* in. ■ *Dan Stapleton*

PC GAMER 67

◆ **Price** $7 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** masseffect.com ◆ **ESRB** M



Skaters are doing it wrong—you're supposed to wear your underwear *outside* of your skin-tight spandex.

Some of the sports, some of the fun in **VANCOUVER 2010**

Olympic gaming boils down to little more than button mashing, but at least *Vancouver 2010* brings enough variety to the table to keep you occupied for a few hours of trying to nail the perfect run. The game's 14 events are broken down into categories like sliding, skiing or skating (sorry, no curling), each of which have their own control schemes. Of course, all the controls are labeled using Xbox buttons, but once you decrypt them you'll be balancing around curves in bobsled, or timing button presses in aerials. A first-person mode adds some intensity, but *Vancouver 2010*'s not going to offer more than a few hours' fun. ■ *Erik Belsaas*

PC GAMER 58

◆ **Price** $25 ◆ **Release** Out now **Link** bit.ly/bKugNT ◆ **ESRB** E

TURKISH DELIGHT

We check the teeth and feel the fetlocks of
MOUNT & BLADE: WARBAND *by Tim Stone*

Need to know

What is it?
Freedom-rich medieval RPG bolstered with multiplayer and single-player tweaks

Influenced by
Mount & Blade, Sid Meier's Pirates!, Lords of Midnight

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 7800/Radeon X800

Alternatively
Oblivion, Renaissance Faires

Copy protection
Online activation

Tumbling horses, arrow-riddled corpses, men hacking at each other with swords and axes...to stand in the midst of a large *Mount & Blade*: *Warband* battle and drink in the scene is to enjoy one of gaming's most exciting combat spectacles. It's also utter lunacy—the equivalent of pinning a "Please Lance Me" notice to your back—especially now that enemies are more than just AI algorithms.

This standalone expansion pack's main contribution to the moveable medieval feast that is *M&B* is multiplayer. There are seven modes on offer, ranging from the obvious deathmatch and capture-the-flag to marginally more imaginative attack-and-defend and siege scenarios. Within a minute of clicking the nag's head on your desktop you can be contentedly crossbow sniping Khergits from Kirkby, caving in the skulls of Nords from Norwich or skewering Sarranids (a new North African faction) from Sarajevo.

If there's a wasp in the codpiece, it's the fact that all these modes, even the ones in which catapults must be destroyed or castles seized, tend to degenerate into the same shapeless skirmishes. Occasionally one side or another will display impressive teamwork, perhaps forming a shield-wall or massing on a tactically critical bridge or rampart, but usually it's every knight for himself in a disorganized frenzy of thundering hooves and flashing steel blades.

Free lancer

There's a heady thrill in being the first up a scaling ladder or charging, lance couched, into the massed ranks of enemy horsemen; but precious, too, are the moments when you find yourself locked in private one-on-one duels. Last night I found myself alone in a fortress tower with a Swadian spearman. We fought up and down stairs, we shredded each other's shields, and we chamber-blocked and kicked (two new combat moves) until eventually my blade buried itself in his breast.

For all their ferocity and flavor, the multiplayer scraps lack the gravity of their single-player equivalents. In the freeform, forge-your-own-destiny campaign that is the brilliant backbone of both *M&B* and *Warband*, defeat in the field means capture, the dissolution of an army, possibly loss of precious equipment; it's a gut-wrenching body-blow. In communal combat, it's a mere hiccup.

Other than a new marriage mechanism (see below), some political improvements and an extra Saharan-styled region for the Calradian map, the solo side of the game has changed very little. *M&B* vets will have previously encountered the vast majority of the missions offered and the NPCs recruited during the long rise from serf to ruler.

I'd love to have seen TaleWorld do more with AI and battlefield variety. After years of watching foes charge straight at me across battlefields devoid of agriculture or architecture, I'd relish meeting an enemy that attacks from multiple directions at once, uses rudimentary formations or holes up in ruins. Once in a while, it would be great to do battle among the tents of a camp or the wagons of a caravan. The new bandit hideout missions, in which you're forced to advance up narrow gullies with minimal support, are a step in the right direction, but are undermined by some deeply duplicitous spawning.

Other minor gripes, like the debug messages that crop up during the campaign and the sometimes questionable strat-map maneuvers of warring factions, are worth airing, but must be set against a telling statistic: *Warband* has purloined more of my time this year than any other game. With an inevitable feast of mods on its way, this happy infatuation is sure to continue. ■

Warband has purloined more of my time this year than any other game.

Advance your career with a *M&B* marriage

"I'd just like to thank..."

The father of the bride for forgiving that youthful indiscretion at Tulbuk.

The bards for tutoring me in the poetry of love.

Nizar, Klethi and the gang, whose bloody banditry helped raise the dowry.

...and Dulua for making me the happiest mass-murderer in Calradia.

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paradox ◆ **Developer** TaleWorlds ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 64
◆ **Link** taleworlds.com ◆ **ESRB** T

VERDICT

Mount & Blade's new multiplayer is a brutal blast. It's a shame the solo side didn't get more attention, though.

PC GAMER **83**

One tap and pate becomes pâté.

Be king of the castle *or* dirty rascal.

Shields can absorb a handfull of arrows before shattering.

Sadly, the Sarannids didn't bring their camels.

All Calradian carrion crows are obese.

A bull's-eye crest wasn't your brightest idea...

VTOL ponies revolutionized medieval warfare.

HEATED

A clutch of memorable characters are forced to live or die hard in **GTA: EPISODES FROM LIBERTY CITY** *by Rich McCormick*

Need to know

What is it?
Two new 15-hour chunks of story in Liberty City. Does not need *GTA IV* to play.

Influenced by
Martin Scorsese, *GTA IV*

Play it on
2.66GHz quad core, 4GB RAM, GeForce GTX260/Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Saints Row 2 (75%)

Copy protection
GfWL, Rockstar Social Club

These episodes—both *The Lost and Damned* and *The Ballad of Gay Tony*—are *Grand Theft Auto* served neat. The two tales are presented without mixer, without the dull filler that made *GTA IV* look more like an astounding technological achievement and less like a world you wanted to live in. Unlike the drugs almost every character in both of these stories snorts, smokes, or injects, *Episodes from Liberty City*'s ingredients are uncut: get a habit, and you're mainlining bike gang shootouts, helicopter-jackings and explosions at every juncture. Fortunately, the game is all the better for it.

Street life

This Liberty City is as teeming with life as previous incarnations, and from the start it's fully-accessible to our two new leading men. *The Lost and Damned*'s Johnny Klebitz is the sensible deputy commander of biker gang The Lost, but still embodies the kind of nihilism that enables *GTA*'s brand of mayhem. Luis Lopez, protagonist of *The Ballad of Gay Tony*, has a stint in jail to lend him an authoritative air. *GTA IV*'s deranged—the time I lured a police convoy through a gas station purely to blow it up in a spectacular fireball springs particularly to mind—Johnny's bewildered but bullish approach to life is easy to get behind.

These two characters are likable, but it's the supporting cast that steals the show.

Niko cameos, which helps tie the stories together, but also serves to highlight his relative drabness as a character.

Chucking The Lost's chapter boss Billy back onto the city sets off a confrontation between Johnny's practicality and Billy's heroin-influenced thought-processes. As the missions get more and more

Gruesome twosome

TBOGT's Luis Lopez operates from a different perspective. As Tony's straight right-hand, Luis is fiercely protective, jumping to his defense, both against attackers and Tony's own self-destructive urges. These two characters are likeable, but it's the supporting cast that steals the show: Yusuf and Mori particularly. The first is the son of a billionaire oil baron, daddy's wallet erupting with cash; the second is the obnoxious orange brother of *GTA IV*'s Brucie, infinitely more irritating than that game's most irritating character. Missions from both of these idiots

A mobile adventure

Killing time with *EFLC*'s mobile phone

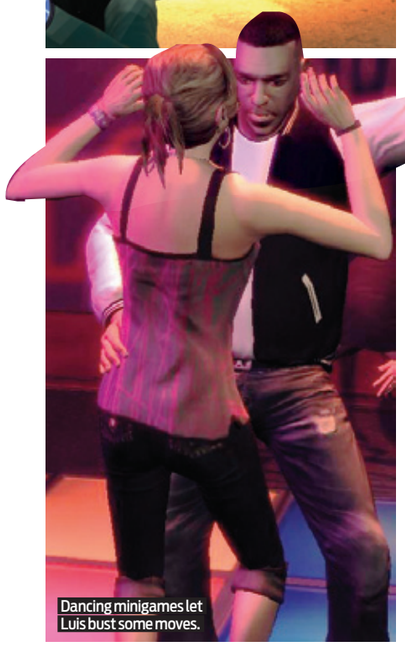
New sticky bombs make for explosive fun.

It's never a good day to be a Liberty City cop.

The cover system feels gooey and imprecise.

Michael Bay would be proud.

I believe the correct term is "wheee!"


Dancing minigames let Luis bust some moves.

"I have to log into both Games for Windows Live *and* Rockstar Social Club? What the hell?"

Almost every job involves taking to the skies in an assortment of helicopters.

lend *The Ballad of Gay Tony* the happy inanity that sees *GTA* at its best, yielding gold-plated helicopters, dancing minigames and most excitingly, parachutes designed for BASE jumping.

Almost every job involves taking to the skies in an assortment of helicopters, parachute strapped to your chest. Those that don't are ridiculous in other pleasing ways: I only realized I'd been holding my breath in giddy tension a minute into one of Mori's cross-city races, hopping between boats, bikes and sports cars to dodge traffic and beat the other playboy racers.

High flying

The best of *Gay Tony* is the best of *GTA*: One mission involves picking up an oddly accented celebrity blogger, whisking him into the skies on a helicopter "tour" of the city, before dropping him overland. A simple show murder in previous games, but here, parachute strapped to his back, Luis takes off after him. Sailing down toward terra firma with a gibbering mess of a man strapped to your chest, his soiled pants set against a setting sun and the city behind him—it's the American Dream.

Gay Tony's missions go to great effort to clear the problems with *GTA*'s mechanics—that each story advancement is little more than glorified courier work: drive to here, take this there. *The Lost and Damned* relies less on high-flying antics, more on tight, focused missions and plenty of fireworks. I spent a lot of time on the lam from the law, skidding Johnny's jean-clad knees around tight corners as I navigated away from the cops through LC's back alleys. Released on console between *GTA IV* proper and *Gay Tony*, it's a midway point between the two views of Liberty City, but works thanks to some useful tweaks.

Bikes have been tightened up, gripping the road and carving through traffic. Taking one of the game's pseudo-Harleys on a mission is a pleasure. Put up against one of Liberty City's more reliable four-wheelers, I found myself always choosing the bike.

Johnny's missions have been trimmed, too, excising the flab of lengthy story missions to deliver a hit of the quality stuff. Gunfights are common, but not protracted, finishing before they've overstayed their welcome, adding checkpoints to skip through tedious mini-scenes you've already aced. Klebitz's exit from the Libertonian museum after a diamond deal gone wrong is a quick shootout, giving the player enough of a flavor of screwuppery to know that the deal's gone wrong without forcing you through endless blank rooms.

Incomplete control

The problem is, despite the narrative and structural tightenings, trying to guide both Johnny and Luis through jobs that demand immediate reactions is made many orders of magnitude tougher through imprecise controls. *GTA*'s basic walk is a swagger that looks good; but when it comes to avoiding gunfire, both Luis and Johnny are fussy about the cover they can and can't stick to. Worse: sometimes I received phone calls mid-mission, leading my character to stand bolt upright and pack away his gun. "Guys, can you stop shooting my exposed face for a second? I'm taking a call here."

Character has always been *GTA*'s sticking point. Johnny isn't likeable, but he's believable; Tony and Luis have the spark of compassion usually missing on the city's streets. *The Lost*'s story is meaner and leaner than anything yet seen, a focused dose of carnage. *The Ballad of Gay Tony* is sillier and more riotously colorful than any *GTA* since *Vice City*. Both burst out of the frame in a way *GTA IV* rarely managed, and both feel like the final word on Liberty City. ■

VERDICT

Better than *GTA IV* in every way, but the formula is beginning to feel tired. An adrenaline-fuelled epilogue to Liberty City.

PC GAMER **89**

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2K ◆ **Developer** Rockstar North/Toronto
◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players, via LAN or Internet ◆ **Link** rockstargames.com/episodesfromlibertycity ◆ **ESRB** M

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, folks!

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising (91%)
May '10

Mass Effect 2 (90%)
March '10

BioShock 2 (90%)
March '10

Left 4 Dead 2 (92%)
January '10

Dragon Age: Origins (92%)
Holiday '09

Batman: Arkham Asylum (93%)
December '09

Resident Evil 5 (93%)
November '09

Streetfighter IV (92%)
October '09

Fallout 3: Broken Steel (90%)
August '09

REINSTALL
CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

That's right: a 1997 game runs in 2560x1600 widescreen.

Totally annihilating Chris Taylor

WE TAKE ON THE BRAIN BEHIND **TOTAL ANNIHILATION** ON HIS OWN TURF *by Dan Stapleton*

The massive scale of *Total Annihilation*'s maps, its huge 500 robo-unit battles and detailed interface played a huge role in hooking me on PC gaming way back in 1997. When it was recently re-released via Stardock's Impulse download service, I got in touch with *TA*'s Lead Designer, Chris Taylor (now CEO of Gas Powered Games), and threw down the gauntlet. Though neither of us had played in years, we dove headfirst into a relatively small map to test our skills years in the complex waters of *Total Annihilation*.

PCG: Are you surprised that a game you designed to run on a Pentium 100MHz with 16MB of RAM at 800x600 still works on a 3.3GHz six-core Core i7-980X with 6GB of RAM at 2560x1600?

Chris Taylor: It's awesome. The thing is, I designed it back in the day to be scalable. What we called "N" back in the day. And without using C++ or object-oriented languages, everything could just scale. This is hilarious—I immediately tried to zoom out, like in *Supreme Commander*. Oh my god, now that's funny.

We both immediately mess up our economies. I neglect to capture enough metal points; Taylor is woefully short on energy.

Are all the memories of making this game flooding back? What was it like at Cavedog?

We were there constantly and had a lot of fun. It was mission impossible, to do things in a short period of time—20 months—where all these other companies were spending ungodly amounts of money on games. *TA* was a made for $1.1 million.

For the first three months I was alone, and then the second three months Clayton Kauzlaric joined me, and then after six months, we had Kevin Pun and a bunch of the other guys join us and jump in progressively. In the last couple of months with everyone all added up, there was probably 30 people involved.

Taylor goes on the offensive first, raiding my forward metal extractors with waves of K-bots. I fend him off with laser point defenses, but not before he does some damage. I meet him in the middle of the map with tanks, fighting to a draw.

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Atari

DEVELOPER
Cavedog

REVIEWED
January 1998 (85%)

WHAT WE SAID THEN
It's not the be-all and end-all of strategy games, but Total Annihilation *packs enough of a punch to keep you battling long into the night*

REQUIRES
Netbook-friendly, Win 7 compatible

GLITCHES
No music, colors occasionally invert (can be fixed by Alt+Tabbing)

GET IT FOR
$10, Impulsedriven.com

WHAT'S HE DOING NOW?
Chris Taylor is currently working on *Kings and Castles*, a fantasy RTS

Any favorite units?

I liked the Peewee. I unfortunately have to take responsibility and blame for the goofy names. And the Jeffy—that was named after Jeff Petkau, one of the engineers on the project. In fact, Jeff was the genius behind the Shift-Click interface [which allows you to queue up as many unit orders as you like].

I launch an air raid of Shadow bombers, destroying several of Taylor's metal and energy production buildings before being knocked out of the sky. I also start building a devastating, long-range Intimidator artillery cannon.

Where did you come up with the unique economy?

It was an attempt to find something new. Back in those days, it was sort of not OK to just rip off everyone else. Now that's the name of the game.

My Intimidator cannon comes online a few minutes before Taylor's comparable Big Bertha. Firing blind at dots on the radar screen, I score a lucky direct hit on his artillery, destroying it and several construction vehicles—a decisive turning point in the battle.

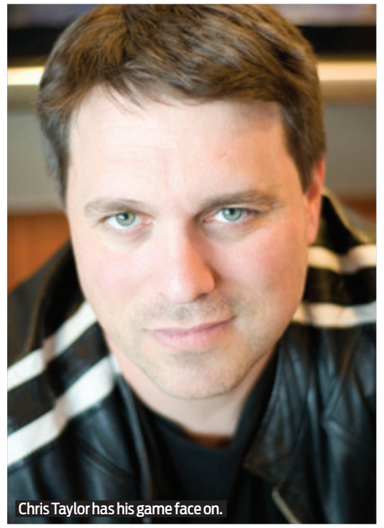
You're just gonna nuke me here in a minute. I'm feeling that old *TA* panic setting in, where if you diddled around too much, you knew it was coming. There were bad things in store.

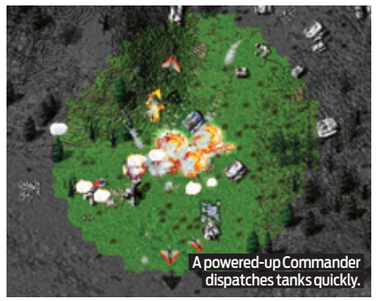
I'm nowhere near launching a nuke, but I do have a wave of strategic bombers that cripple his energy production with their insanely powerfully bombing runs. Without power, Taylor's defensive laser towers go offline, and my heavy tanks smash through. Taylor's Commander obliterates the first wave with his arm-mounted D-Gun, but then runs completely out of power. I chase him down and strike the killing blow, ending the match in a spectacular detonation.

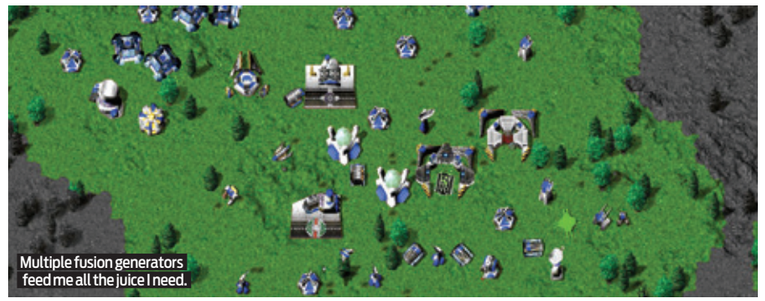
Well, you lost, but that was a great game. Any closing thoughts?

I'm going back to look at this game, as if with another set of fresh eyes—there are some really cool things about the way it all flows together. It's slow, but you can get your head around it. Things aren't happening so fast that it's alarming. There was this tank skirmish in the middle, and I was kinda comfortable with it. I didn't freak out; I didn't feel like you were all over me. It's kinda nice. We were in the middle of the map, almost exactly, and we were slugging it out having a great time. It's amazing that a game I designed 14 years ago can still teach me a lot. ■

Strategic bombers deal serious damage.


Chris Taylor has his game face on.


A powered-up Commander dispatches tanks quickly.


Multiple fusion generators feed me all the juice I need.

1 All-conquering

MODS RANSACK NEW WORLDS WITH THESE **MOUNT & BLADE** TOTAL CONVERSIONS

Fans of this kingdom-conquering horseback brawler have been enjoying the efforts of a dedicated modding community since the game's release. The low-tech engine makes *Mount & Blade* a joy for modders—there's already a wealth of tweaks and upgrades available online.

Graphical Enhancement 2.5 (*bit.ly/d4NZNV*), as the name cryptically hints, makes everything prettier, while Native Improved (*bit.ly/dCTWyn*) is ideal for purists who want to expand the game without changing it too much.

The most impressive mods revamp the game world completely, adding new armies to command and fresh lands to conquer. And yes, some of the people in these lands are armed with lightsabers instead of swords. **EL**

Star Wars: Conquest

Swap your steed for a landspeeder and your longsword for a lightsaber in this impressively thorough conversion. Play as a Rebel droid general; fend off Admiral Akbar himself as a Hutt mercenary; fight a land war against Han Solo on Hoth. The open-form gameplay lends itself perfectly to Star Wars.

SIZE 124MB LINK biturl.cc/kOW

Chronicles of Taiera

Mount & Blade has no zombies in it. Not one. Fix that with this fantasy mod, which revamps the map and adds new factions, each of which has its own history and lore to justify your decision to don swanky armor and decapitate orcs with the new weapons.

SIZE 139MB LINK bit.ly/aKj6Yu

Britannia 1080

The British Isles are yours to conquer in this historical conversion set just after the Norman conquest. Take charge of the English, Welsh, Irish or Scots and unite Britain using brute force. This mod adds an excellent campaign map and, more importantly, excellent kilts.

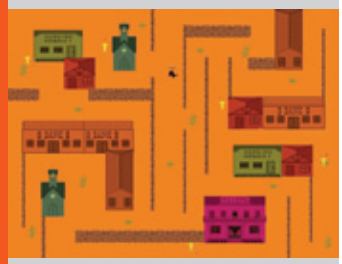
SIZE 17.7MB LINK bit.ly/bApQv1

2 COWBOY GAMES

FREEWARE

SOME OF THE WILD WEST'S FINEST FREE GAMING EXPORTS

Stranger, you look like a dab hand with a six-shooter. Try your luck with these itchy-fingered dudes who just strode into town.



GunFu Deadlands

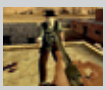
You're a lone cowboy up against some of the West's deadliest slingers, but you do have a distinct advantage: bullet time. *bit.ly/dxunyj*

Calamity Annie

Controlled solely with the mouse, which aims your revolver, this simple but satisfying pixel shooter is all about the quick draw. *bit.ly/9FrzHR*

You Cannot Die

Except you can. A lot. This is a brutal survival game where you feast on your kills just to live. *bit.ly/9iHuce*



Fistful of Frags

Wonderful setting-sun-blushed first-person shooter mod for *Half-Life 2*. Build your notoriety by dealing death to earn better weapons. *bit.ly/drSxEv*

3 World War II: The Prequel

MOD BAYONET IT TO 'EM IN **WWI SOURCE: BETA 1**

For too long, the First World War has long been overshadowed in videogames by its fashionable younger sibling. No longer. A *Half-Life 2* mod, *WWI Source: Beta 1* provides trench-warfare inspired multiplayer funtime.

Both the Allied and Central Powers teams have three classes: Infantry, Machinegunners and an Officer. The game is about territory control: you must drive the opposing force back toward their bunker—by killing them a lot. Infantry are the basic, rifle-sporting class.

Machinegunners take forever to unpack their spam-cannons, leaving you more vulnerable than a mannequin in a shooting range. Officers can summon air strikes simply by looking through binoculars.

Being beta, it's rough around the edges, but if ironsights, bolting your rifle after firing a single shot and one-hit kills do it for you, then *WWI Source* will be right up your trench. **TR**

SIZE 233MB LINK bit.ly/bSnMdp

No one seemed to know where the shots were coming from.

Murder annoying intro movies

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME Three minutes
VITAL LINKS

RAD Video Tools
(.bik player)
bit.ly/cC8mtB

VLC Media Player
(Plays nearly any video file)
videolan.org

DAN STAPLETON'S GUIDE TO SKIPPING STRAIGHT TO THE GAME

The most dangerous place you can stand isn't between a mother grizzly bear and her cub, it's between a gamer and his game. It doesn't matter who you are—old lady, sick orphan or adorable puppy—you *will* be flattened like a penny on a train track. This is basic survival knowledge, and it's why we're filled with blinding, berserker rage when game publishers force us to watch an endless parade of logos and credits *every single time* we launch a game.

We'd never advocate omitting credit for the hard work of the publishers, developers and middleware makers who create our games, but that's what the *first* run is for. Every time thereafter, when we double-click a shortcut to launch a game, we demand instant gratification.

And we shall have it. With a few tricks too simple to even be called hacks, these irritating obstructions can be purged from your games and speed you straight to the action. You'll have to roll up your sleeves and dive into the data files, but follow these detailed instructions, and you can remove intros from 14 recent games without fear.

Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II - Chaos Rising

GO TO: Steam\steamapps\common\dawn of war 2\GameAssets\Data\Movies

DELETE: amd_intro.avi, dowii_intro_final.avi, thq_logo_new720p_divx.avi, gw_logo_720p_divx1.avi, nvidia_logo.avi, relicintro_720p_divx.avi, gfwl_logo.avi

The Sims 3

GO TO: bit.ly/d87TVF

You can't just delete files here, unfortunately. Instead, download this mod and drop it in the Mods directory in your *Sims 3* folder. You do have to register to download, but it's worth the effort if you're a frequent *Sims 3* player.

Supreme Commander 2

GO TO: Steam\steamapps\common\supreme commander 2\movies

DELETE: black_SE.win.usm, FMV_Alienware.win.usm, FMV_AMD.win.usm, FMV_Criware.win.usm, FMV_Legal.win.usm, gpglogo.win.usm

Assassin's Creed 2

GO TO: assassin's creed 2\Videos

DELETE: UBI_LOGO.bik

GO TO: assassin's creed 2\Videos\en

DELETE: warning_disclaimer.bik

Battlefield: Bad Company 2

GO TO: Battlefield Bad Company 2\Output\Win32\Movies\Introtransitions

COPY: fallbackbackgroundmovie.res, then back out to the Movies folder.

DELETE: ea_logo_hd.res and dolbydigital.res. Paste two copies of fallbackbackgroundmovie.res and rename them to impersonate the deleted files.

Crysis

GO TO: Crysis/Game/Localized/Video

DELETE: intro.sfd, trailer_crytek.sfd, trailer_crytekC.sfd, trailer_EA.sfd, trailer_intel.sfd, trailer_Nvidia.sfd, trailer_rating.sfd

GO TO: Crysis/Game/Localized/Video/English

DELETE: Trailer_rating_full.sfd, Trailer_rating_logo.sfd

Mass Effect 2

GO TO: Mass Effect 2\BioGame\Movies

DELETE: ME_EAsig_720p_v2_raw.bik, BWLogo.bik

BioShock 2

GO TO: bioshock 2\SP\Content\BinkMovies

DELETE: Dev_Logo_PC_EFS.bik, Dev_Logo_PC.bik, Dev_Logo_PC_EIG.bik

Batman: Arkham Asylum

GO TO: batman arkham asylum\BmGame\Movies

DELETE: utlogo.bik, Legal.bik, Legalus.bik, baa_logo_run_v5_h264.bik

Borderlands

GO TO: Borderlands\WillowGame\Movies

DELETE: 2K_logo.bik, Gearbox_logo.bik, NVidia.bik

Note: *Sorry about the Havok and GameSpy intro screens—those are unkillable.*

Splinter Cell: Conviction

GO TO: Splinter Cell Conviction\Data\Videos

DELETE: Logo_Clancy_01.bik, Logo_ESRB_01.bik, Logo_ESRB_2.bik, Logo_MiddleWare_01.bik, Logo_Ubisoft.bik

Modern Warfare 2

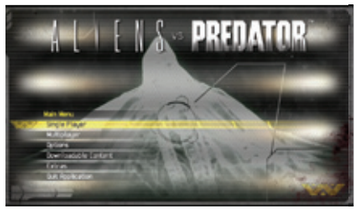
GO TO: Steam\steamapps\common\call of duty modern warfare 2\main\video

DELETE: default.bik, IW_logo.bik, Legal.bik

Dragon Age: Origins

GO TO: dragon age orignes\pack ages\core\data\movies

DELETE: dragon_age_ea_logo.bik, dragon_age_main.bik



Aliens vs. Predator

GO TO: Steam\steamapps\common\aliens vs predator\FMV

DELETE: Rebellion.bik, Sega.bik, Fox.bik

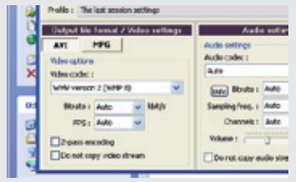
SADISTIC

WEAPONIZED INTRO MOVIES

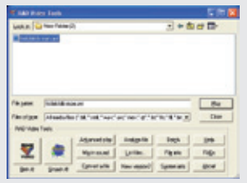
PUT YOUR OWN MOVIE IN FRONT OF YOUR (OR YOUR FRIENDS') GAMES

1 Install RAD Video Tools (see "Vital Links" on the previous page)

2 Grab your least favorite .avi video, or download a YouTube video using SaveVid.com. For the purposes of this tutorial, we'll use Trololololo Man, also known as "The Soviet Rickroll." Note that the use of this clip is considered a war crime. Convert the .flv to .avi using a free converter, such as Pazera (get it here: bit.ly/bZO0mJ). Be sure to change the Video Codec to WMV version 2 (WMP 8).



3 Using RAD Video Tools, select Trololololo Man.avi and hit the "Bink it!" button in the bottom left. Default settings are fine, so push "Bink" on the right.



4 Rename the resulting Trololololo Man.bik to 2k_logo.bik and place it in the Borderlands\WillowGame\Movies directory. If you haven't already deleted the existing one, replace it.

5 Pull up a chair and watch as the victim launches *Borderlands*. The video will play in place of the 2K logo, and thanks to *Borderlands*' unskippable intros, he'll be forced to watch the entire thing before the game will start. There is no escape.

The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

TESTED

Alienware M11x

Alienware

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

When netbooks first came out, many were skeptical: Who wants a cheap, underpowered laptop? Turns out, everybody did. So if you're surprised to see Alienware pimping an expensive, overpowered netbook and wondered who'd want one of those, the answer is: You do.

It's not an exaggeration to say that, true to its name, the M11x is essentially Alienware's magnificent M17x (Holiday '09, 95%) shrunk to fit an 11.6-inch screen. It's got all the accoutrements: the Alien FX customizable lighting; the fantastic, almost imperceptibly concave keys; the trackpad and mouse buttons that have no peer in any other portable, large or small; and, of course, the sinister, your-planet-is-toast chassis.

It's almost as light as a standard netbook, but cranks out some serious gaming.

On the engineering deck you'll find Intel's U7300 CPU (overclocked from 1.3GHz to 1.73GHz), 4GB RAM and NVIDIA's GeForce GT 335M GPU (1GB RAM), as well as Intel's GMA 4500MHD onboard video. These aren't household names, of course, but the processor, plucked from Intel's dual-core, ultra low-voltage line, no doubt figures into the six-cell battery's ass-kicking endurance—over 7.5 hours with integrated graphics activated and Wi-Fi on, and 3.25 hours looping HD video with the GeForce in play. This was a completely unexpected bonus—I honestly didn't expect the M11x to be able to outdo standard six-cell netbooks with much smaller screens in workaday use.

Another bonus: VGA, HDMI *and* DisplayPort connectors—once you get home, you're out of netbookville and playing at resolutions of up to 1920x1200 on your HDTV. Yeah, you can do that. You'll want to ratchet that down to, say, 1680x1050 or so to get a steady 30fps from a game like *Mass Effect*, but I clocked over 100fps playing *Half-Life 2: Episode 1* at 1920x1200!

I'm not wild about the compact arrangement of the arrow keys, and I'm surprised that the M11x doesn't take advantage of NVIDIA's new Optimus technology, which can automatically fire up the faster GPU when it's needed. But at least you don't have to reboot when switching GPUs (a process that takes only a couple of seconds). My biggest criticism of the M11x is the screen— while extremely sharp, it isn't nearly as bright or as high-contrast as the M17x display.

But these issues merely take the M11x down from earth-shattering to freakin' awesome. At 4.5 lbs., it's almost as compact and light as standard netbooks while outdoing them in battery life. And yet it cranks out some serious gaming whenever you need it to. There's no portable like it. Like many others, I was skeptical, but this alien made a believer out of me.

$1,099, alienware.com

VERDICT

Battery life? Ahead of the pack. HD video? Easily. Gaming? You betcha. Alienware just leveled up the ultraportable.

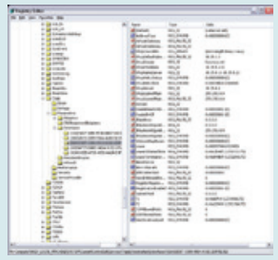
PC GAMER **90**

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Intel U7300 (overclocked to 1.73GHz) ◆ **RAM** 4GB DDR3 ◆ **GPU** Intel GMA 4500MHD, Nvidia GeForce GT 335M ◆ **Storage** 500GB HD ◆ **OS** Win 7 Home Premium 64-bit ◆ **3DMark06/ Vantage** 5197/2857 ◆ **Crysis** 11.7 fps ◆ **SupCom** 19 fps

Q&A

Wild Ping-dom

Q: I see hacks that are supposed to speed up your Internet connection by changing settings in the Windows Registry all the time. But are there any hacks or tweaks that are specifically intended to lower your ping? Even if it only lowered mine by a little bit, if it's free, that's better than nothing. ***R. Hancock***



Look for this thing if you want to change your ping

A: *Well, maybe not better than nothing. Many of those hacks come in convenient tablet form: as .reg files that you simply double-click on to enter into your Registry.* ***Don't.*** *You have no idea what's in that payload. Of course, you could right-click on the file instead, select Open With, and then choose Notepad (you may have to navigate to c:\windows\notepad.exe) to peek at its contents, but even then, it's a tricky proposition. But there is one fairly reliable tweak to lower your latency. Enter "regedit" in the Start menu search bar and then navigate to HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Services\Tcpip\Parameters\Interfaces\. Each of those folders under Interfaces represents one of your network cards; look for the one with your IP details in the right-hand pane and right-click on it. Select New > DWORD value and call it TcpAckFrequency. Right-click on that and give it a value of 1.*

Almost done. Now navigate to HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\MSMQ\Parameters, right-click on it, select New > DWORD value and call it TCPNoDelay. Right-click on this, give it a value of 1, and reboot. This may slow other games or services down, and you may have to install MSMQ from the Control Panel, but we've seen it cut ping times considerably before. Remember to ***always*** *backup your registry before making an edit.*

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU Cooler Master Cosmos; 850W PSU	$423	**CASE AND PSU** Nzxt Alpha: Ocz Gamexstream 700W PSU	$175	**CASE AND PSU** Generic Case; Corsair 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-950 3.06GHz	$555	**PROCESSOR** Intel Core i7-920 2.66GHz	$270	**PROCESSOR** AMD Athlon X2 6000+ 3.0GHz	$59
MOTHERBOARD Asus P6T Deluxe V2	$270	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus P6T	$234	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY Corsair 6GBDDR3-1600	$155	**MEMORY** Corsair 6GB DDR3-1333	$165	**MEMORY** Corsair 2GB DDR2-800	$69
OPTICAL DRIVE LG Who8LS20Blu-ray	$179	**OPTICAL DRIVE** LG GH22NP20	$31	**OPTICAL DRIVE** Sony DDU1681S	$26
HARD DRIVE Intel X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$311	**HARD DRIVE** WD 500GB 720RPM	$50	**HARD DRIVE** WD 250GB 7200RPM	$38
SOUNDCARD Creative Labs X-Fi Titanium	$96	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0
VIDEOCARD Radeon HD5870 (2)	$814	**VIDEOCARD** Radeon HD 5870	$407	**VIDEOCARD** GeForce GT 220	$70
TOTAL PRICE	**$2,803**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$1,332**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$491**

TESTED

Psyko 5.1 Headset

Psyko Audio

Big and heavy enough to appear as if it might be taking something *out* of your head instead of putting something in, the 5.1 Psyko PC Gaming Headset takes a unique approach to surround sound audio. Instead of simulating it with psychoacoustic tricks or cramming multiple drivers into each earphone, Psyko takes the 5.1 surround sound signal from your PCs soundcard, amplifies it in an AC-powered, driverless breakout box and pipes it to five speaker drivers up in the *headband* of the headphones. From here, the sound is funneled down through tubes to the front and back of the cups (where you'll also find subwoofers snug-a-bug in the bottom). The result is positional audio with astonishing clarity; it will be hard to go back to the relatively wooly, diffuse surround sound of any other 5.1 headset.

But you probably will go back to them because the Psyko 5.1s are brutally bulky, and neither the cushy headband nor the earphones (the backs of which open up for airflow) are going to bring you any solace after a half hour. And while the surround audio is ace, the headphones mulch music, and both stereo and surround sound movie audio is clumsily rendered and distributed throughout the drivers.

You'll kiss the glorious plastic arch of the Psyko 5.1 the first time you take down a Spy after hearing him slyly decloaking behind you and to your left. But unless you're willing to pony up for the expensive privilege, all I can say is: You better keep watching your back.

PC GAMER **84**

$300, psykoaudio.com

Install a second hard drive

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME 1 hour
VITAL LINKS
Setting up a multiboot system
bit.ly/d3JSD
Video tutorial
bit.ly/hsri8
On a laptop instead? Follow these hints
bit.ly/136FBO

GET THE SPACE YOU NEED WITHOUT COMPLICATED PC SURGERY

One thing you can always be certain of is that you will never have enough storage. Ever. Where 500MB at one time seemed grossly decadent, now even 2TB drives fill up faster than Oprah's tights, thanks to 17GB game installs and Blu-ray rips. Sure, you could spend hours tweezing out games and files to make room for the year ahead in *Mass Effect 2* DLC, but why bother when storage is so cheap and slapping in a new drive is so easy?

But laziness isn't the only reason to get another drive. It also gives you the chance to organize and protect your files by devoting one drive to Windows and your installed programs, and leaving the second free for all your documents, music, movies and data. That way, if anything goes wrong, you can reformat and reinstall Windows without risking a single byte of precious data.

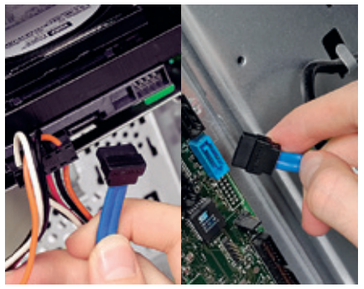
How complicated is this? Not at all. If you have a recent system, chances are you'll be working with a SATA drive, such as this 250GB Western Digital drive that you can buy for less than $50. If so, and you've got the cables and a screwdriver on hand, you can do it in just a few minutes.

1 Check the terrain

Unplug your computer case and open it. Find your existing hard drive—there should be two cables attached to it. Follow the thinner of the two down to the motherboard. If you see the ports pictured, you're using Serial ATA—SATA for short. Next, check the larger of the two cables. This supplies the power from your PSU.

2 Hooking it up

Slide the new drive into a spare 3.5" bay. Then you'll need to either screw or click it into position, depending on your case's design. Make sure that it's nice and secure to minimize vibration, but don't tighten any of the screws too much. If possible, give it breathing room away from your other drive, especially if your room temperature tends to run hot.

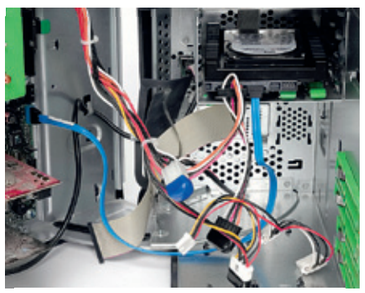


3 The data cable

Plug the data cable into the back of the new drive—there's only one port that will fit it. Next, as in Step 1, follow the data cable on your existing drive back down to the motherboard. This will almost certainly be plugged into the first SATA port. Plug the other end of your new data cable into any of the other ports.

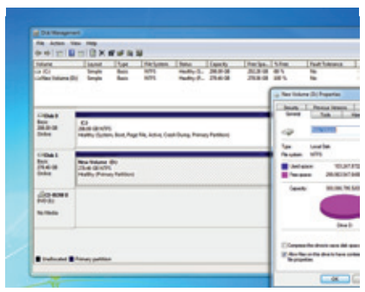
4 More power!

If your PC is a few years old, the loose cables dangling from your PSU might have blocky white connectors with four round holes in the end. They're called Molex connectors, which are obsolete, so they won't fit in your new drive. Fortunately, most drives will come with an adapter that will convert the chunky Molex into a flat black SATA power plug like the one shown here. Plug that sucker in.



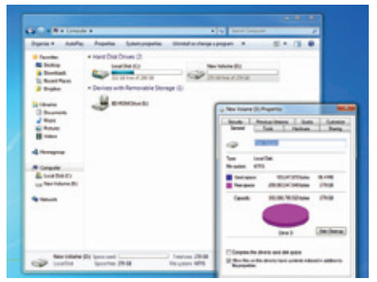
5 Power on

Make sure that all the cables are well seated. Take special care checking that no loose cables are blocking the way of your system fans, or the ones cooling your graphics card. Close the case, plug it in, switch it on. If your PC complains that it can't boot, chances are you've knocked a cable out of your first drive, or you might've plugged the new drive into the number one SATA port by mistake.



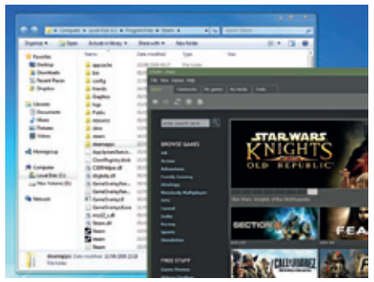
6 Where's the drive?

Before we can use the drive, it has to be formatted. Just to be on the safe side, you should back up any critical files before going further. Then go to Control Panel and open the Disk Management tool (Windows Vista and Windows 7 only, unfortunately). Right-click on the space next to the new drive (it'll be empty), choose to format it and then create a Simple volume.



7 Space to kill

Windows will now enable you to access all that lovely free space, which will be on the drive letter you selected after formatting it. You can start filling it up with whatever you've got to fill it up with. We suggest games—lots and lots of games.



8 Moving house

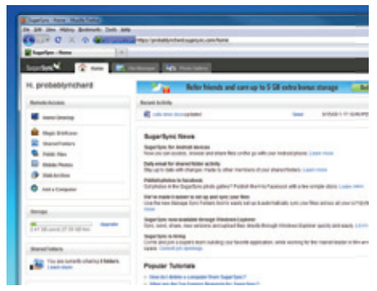
Most applications will need to be reinstalled if you want to move them to the new drive, but some programs are much easier to move. Steam, for instance, enables you to simply copy your "steamapps" folder to the desktop, reinstall the client on your new drive and then drag the folder and its contents across into its new home.

9 Multibooting

Another potential use for a second hard drive is multibooting. Windows 7 is pretty damn good, but many of us often need to go back to older versions of the operating system when playing classic games, or even use Linux on occasion. It's easy to set up a dual boot system—check the links at the beginning of this tutorial for primers.

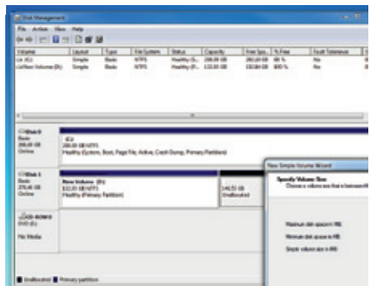
10 The virtual alternative

If you're playing much older games, you may not need to dual boot at all. Using virtual machines, such as the free VirtualBox or the commercial Parallels Desktop, you can get those old operating systems running on your desktop instead. This won't be any use for 3D games, but it's worth a crack for older 2D classics.



11 Data protection

If you don't already have a backup routine in place, now's a great time to consider one. Online backup services offer you protection in case your house blows up. We like SugarSync (sugarsync.com), which offers an excellent interface and 30GB of space for only $4.99 a month. That's at least enough for your critical data, saved games and whatnot.



12 Advanced installation

If you're installing a hulking 2TB drive, you can also partition the new drive for different uses—for instance, 100GB for your music, 150GB for your videos and so on. This can make your files easier to find and manage. The Disk Management tool enables you to shrink the volume from the full disk and create new disk partitions of whatever size you like in the free space.

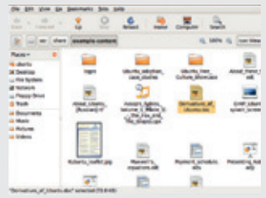
SKILLS

THINGS TO DO WITH A VIRTUAL MACHINE

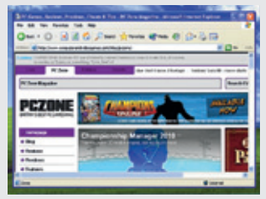
SAFE, SECURE AND VERY USEFUL

1 While a dedicated machine is the most reliable way to get classic games running on an old operating system, a virtual machine (VM) could probably do the trick on your current rig.

2 A VM gives you a safe sandbox to test out games or applications from mysterious sources. But, then again, it's always wise to avoid mysterious sources.



3 Okay, Linux may not be great for playing games, but it has other benefits—and a virtual machine is the perfect way to get your feet wet with this OS (or a new distro).



4 We know the kind of websites that you visit. With a VM, they're not just hidden away in a different user account, but in a whole new parallel universe PC. That's as safe as surfing gets.

PERK IDEAS FOR FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

Nine suggested character traits for the upcoming *Fallout* sequel

DARWINIAN

-100% depth. Player will also occasionally feel compelled to toss a live grenade at his own feet, then squeal in dismay like a digital cat.

FOPPISH DANDY

-3 to Perception due to the player looking down his nose at everyone. Adds aura: Haughty Disdain. Does not protect against radiation.

WANNABE THUG

+5 to Thievery, but only in convenience stores. Automatically intimidates elderly characters. Character may equip the pants class "Baggy."

GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT

Player gains experience from any melee injuries inflicted upon him, but suffers -30 points to Speech skill due to restrictive ball-gag.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE

Immediate gender change, but each time the player uses VATS, there's a chance Pierce Brosnan will seduce their current companion.

BIG DADDY

+20 damage resistance, -1 hand, -10 to Sneak due to rusty groaning. Enables the player to enlist any female child as a permanent companion.

LIL' CTHULHU

-10 to Euclidian geometry, +10 disposition to Centaurs. Player can now look directly at the ground and press USE to immediately devour the Earth.

BARACK OBLAMMA

Immune to all attacks of any conceivable kind. Also gives +33% damage versus any human over the age of 70, +1 hope, +1 unity, +1 change.

EMU THIEF

The player has a 33% chance for an extra beak attack in VATS, but -50 disposition with all characters, particularly females.